SHADOW SLAVE
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DREAD NIGHT

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Volume-5

Dread Night

Chapter-751: Master Sunless

In one of the fortified lecture halls of the Awakened Academy, a large auditorium was slowly filling up with students. These young men and women, however, did not look like inexperienced Sleepers. Instead, most of them possessed the grim confidence of battle-tested veterans.

They were sharp and rough around the edges, exhibiting the tell-tale signs of those who had just recently returned from the Dream Realm. For the same reason, the crowd of students was suffused with a sense of energy and liveliness typical to people who had recently brushed with death, but managed to escape its clutches alive.

These were the newly Awakened. Several weeks after the winter solstice, most of those who were destined to survive had already found their way to a human Citadel and returned to the waking world. Now, they were settling into their new lives and responsibilities.

While some chose to forge their own path, many decided to remain in the Academy for a while longer. Its curriculum was not only aimed at Sleepers, after all. A larger part of the complex was dedicated to continuous training of the Awakened students.

Just because one had survived the crucible of their first venture into the Dream Realm did not mean that they could stop learning, after all. In fact, faced with its many challenges, most of the survivors learned one crucial lesson.

No matter how prepared they were, that was never enough.

…Granted, the lecture that these particular young Awakened were about to listen to was not from a popular course. Titled "Resource Management during Prolonged Expeditions and Intercitadel Travel", the course had nothing to do with battle training or Aspect proficiency. As such, it was rather obscure and unpopular.

The large crowd of students had more to do with the identity of the lecturer as opposed to the theme of the course. As an actual Ascended and a person of wide renown, this star lecturer presented an irresistible attraction to the Awakened students.

Who was better to teach them than a person who had braved the dangers of the Dream Realm and slain countless Nightmare Creatures with their own two hands?

As the time of the lecture approached, the students settled on the seats in the auditorium and waited for the lecturer to arrive.

One of the last to come in was a young man in stylish civilian clothes. They were predominantly black, with subdued grey accents. The young man glanced at the young Awakened, then proceeded to walk to the center of the auditorium.

A few people looked at him in confusion.

Instead of joining his fellow students, the young man walked to the teacher's desk and outstretched one hand. To everyone's bewilderment, he was summoning a Memory!

Stranger still, that Memory turned out to be in the shape of an exquisite wooden chair. The strange guy put it down, then took a seat behind the desk and looked at them as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

Several Awakened opened their mouths to condemn his childish antics, but then hesitated. Although the eccentric student was bound to anger the lecturer with his disrespectful behavior, there was something about him that demanded attention. Another reason for their hesitation was that he was… incredibly attractive.

The young man was not very tall, but his slender build and stylish attire made him look very charming. With his porcelain skin and raven black hair, he looked like an exquisite doll. His striking dark eyes seemed to glint with good-natured humor.

At the same time, there was something cold about them that made those who looked at the young man for too long shiver.

It was as though shadows grew a little deeper around him.

After a few moments, one of the young women in the first row cleared her throat and said in a friendly tone:

"Hey! You better move before Master Sunless arrives. Here, there is a free seat… uh… right next to me…"

The young man looked at her and smiled pleasantly.

At the same time, the girl next to her whispered furiously:

"What are you doing?! This is Master Sunless, you idiot!"

The first girl slowly opened her eyes wide, then turned beat-red and raised one hand to cover her mouth in horror.

A wave of whispers ran through the auditorium.

"What? This is Master Sunless?"

"But he's our age!"

"Of course he's our age! It took him less than two years to Ascend! Why do you think he is famous?!"

"...He's not at all like the actor who played him in the Song of Light and Darkness! The casting director must be crazy!"

Sunny, who listened to all that with the same pleasant smile, cleared his throat. Immediately, the students grew quiet.

"Good morning, Awakened. I am Ascended Sunless. You can call me Master Sunless, or simply Master. Welcome to the first lecture of the Resource Management during Prolonged Expeditions and Intercitadel Travel course. As some of you might know, I have a tiny amount of experience with that…"

A few polite chuckles resounded from the audience, making him wince internally.

'Damn. Tough crowd!'

As this was his first day as a teacher in the Academy, Sunny was unsurprisingly nervous. He would much rather fight a room full of Nightmare Creatures than speak in front of a room full of people.

He could kill the Nightmare Creatures, at least!

Sunny paused for a moment, then said:

"We will explore various topics in the course of these lectures. But first, let me ask you a question…"

He looked at his students and smiled.

"What was the biggest threat to your life in the Dream Realm?"

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Overall, the lecture went better than Sunny had expected. If not for the fact that many female students had stared at him a bit too intensely, for some reason, he would have been completely comfortable teaching these young Awakened.

After all, he was basing the lessons on his own experience, and the students, while not as battle-hardened as him, were not amateurs themselves. Each of them had survived the First Nightmare and a journey to the Dream Realm. So, the lecture was more of an exchange of knowledge between professionals than a traditional lesson.

It was even refreshing, compared to his tutoring sessions with Rain. Although his sister was incredibly talented and hard-working, not to mention nice to be around, there were many things he simply couldn't explain to her with words.

With a sigh, Sunny turned off the projector and looked at the empty auditorium.

Was this his life now?

Six months had passed since the cohort returned from the Second Nightmare. During this time, many things happened. He had celebrated his twentieth birthday just a few weeks ago… some of the changes were good, and some were bad.

On the bright side, he got to spend a lot of time with Rain, teaching her how to protect herself and slowly growing closer to her. Sunny had been careful not to appear too friendly, though. He still did not want anyone, including the girl herself, to know that they were siblings.

He had also spent a lot of time talking to Aiko and trying to turn the Brilliant Emporium into a small, but thriving business.

However, there was one big problem that loomed over everything he did.

Ever since returning from the Nightmare, Sunny was not able to enter the Dream Realm again. He had spent all six months in the safety of the waking world. And the reason for that was the strange situation he had found himself in with clan Valor.

While Saint Tyris had done everything in her power to shield Sunny and Cassie from the wrath of the great clan, her influence was not unlimited. The White Feather clan itself got into hot water with their overlords. From what Sunny learned, they were dismissed from ruling the Chained Island and burdened with another duty.

What that duty was, he did not know.

Both Cassie and he would have fared poorly if they remained Awakened. However, their Ascension changed things substantially and gave them more room to bargain. If before the great clans would have been inclined to make them disappear, now, they were more careful in their approach.

Which did not mean that everything was fine.

The issue was too nuanced and sensitive to be solved quickly. So, the preparations for the negotiations took a lot of time. For the time being, both of them had to protect themselves.

Things were much worse for Cassie, who seemed more complicit in Mordret's escape. After all, she had requested to be stationed in the Night Temple, only to leave after a while and return, causing the disaster.

Since no one except for Saint Tyris knew about Sunny's clash with Mirror Beast, it was easy to believe that Cassie had come in contact with the imprisoned prince during her stay in the Citadel, and then orchestrated his escape… or that she had this goal in mind from the very beginning.

As the result, things turned a bit ugly for the Fire Keepers. After a couple of them disappeared, the rest took shelter in the Ebony and Ivory Towers, where the ocean of divine flames and the Crushing protected them from any threat. They rarely returned to the waking world to avoid problems.

Sunny was on the opposite side of things. Thanks to Master Jet, he enjoyed a bit of protection from the government. Since the Great Clans had a lot of influence in the Dream Realm, but were not as powerful in the waking world, he was advised to remain there for a while.

Which meant that he could enjoy some peace and quiet for a bit.

…It also meant that he could not hunt the Nightmare Creatures and saturate his cores, unless a Gate suddenly opened nearby.

This… was a problem.

Chapter-752: Solid Foundation

After the Seed of Nightmare had been destroyed, something unexpected happened. A Gateway took its place, turning the Ivory Tower into a Citadel.

At the same time, the Dream Realm anchors of the cohort members shifted, becoming tied to it. Masters did not have to travel to another world every time they slept, but they still needed a Gateway to return to reality. Changing an anchor was as easy as making use of another Gateway, but there lay the problem.

The only way to leave their new Citadel was to either brave the Crushing, somehow, or to go through the portal to the Ebony Tower and rise from the depths of the Sky Below on the flying ship.

While that made the Ivory Tower incredibly safe, it also meant that there were no Nightmare Creatures around for them to hunt. There was no point for Sunny to go to the Dream Realm at all, especially after he had explored Hope's former prison, finding nothing of particular interest inside.

...It also meant that Mordret was most likely tied to the same Gateway. However, the Prince of Nothing had never shown himself. Either he had found a way to change his anchor, or he had chosen to remain in the waking world as well.

In any case, there was no safe way for Sunny to collect shadow fragments in the Dream Realm. He was also cut from his main source of Memories, which he had hoped to put on sale through the Emporium.

At first, Sunny was very unhappy with this situation. He was both much stronger and still far behind Nephis in terms of raw power. Even though there was a vast gap of two Ranks between them now, his soul lusted to grow even more.

He could never have enough strength, never be powerful enough to protect himself and those he cared about from the vicissitudes of life. He was still too weak to challenge fate.

…But after a few days of peaceful life in the waking world, Sunny had started to slowly change his mind.

In the past three years, his power had grown tremendously, and at a breakneck pace. While that was extremely beneficial overall, there was a negative side to such speed.

His foundation had turned unstable. He had been so preoccupied with gaining more power, more strength, deeper insight, greater understanding… that he had not spent enough time actually assimilating all these gains into a coherent whole. Internalizing and absorbing all the lessons he had learned into his very bones was very important, yet he had neglected it for the lack of time and opportunity.

He needed time to truly make the vast power he had won his own.

Additionally, there was something else that concerned Sunny. His... mental state.

Ever since he had been infected by the Nightmare Spell at sixteen, his psyche had been subjected — sometimes by the circumstances and sometimes through his own volition — to incredible abuse. Sunny prided himself on the fact that he never broke, no matter what ghastly horror and gruesome agony he had to endure.

And there had been plenty.

However, he also never forgot the conversation he had with Master Jet on the way to Shadow Blade Kurt's execution. He knew that Awakened, no matter how great and powerful they seemed, were also the most likely to crack. The nightmares they brought back from the Dream Realm haunted them, and many succumbed to the relentless strain.

Sunny had been gutted, beheaded, and burned. He had watched friends die or be left behind. The amount of torturous pain he had

gone through could only compare to the amount of mental anguish he had experienced. The Red Colosseum, the nightmares, and all the rest… it was enough to crush a dozen people. And yet, he still stood tall.

But for how long?

While Sunny considered himself to be a resilient person, maybe even incredibly so, he was not prideful enough to think that he was better than every other human out there. Would his soul and mind continue to remain strong if he continued to carelessly abuse them, or would small cracks appear on their surfaces?

Maybe there were countless cracks on them, already.

…In the end, he had decided that taking a break to consolidate his foundation and give his mind time to heal was worth it. The situation with clan Valor, while unpleasant, was not critical. It just demanded time and caution. Slowly but surely, the sides were going to come to an understanding and find a compromise through negotiations.

As Masters of considerable renown, Sunny and Cassie had enough influence and weight to reach a favorable outcome in these negotiations, especially because fifty of the most promising Awakened of their generation were following Song of the Fallen.

He was going to use the time before that happened to his benefit.

So, although the past six months had not exactly been exciting for Sunny, they had been very fruitful.

He had spent a lot of time practicing his combat skills and Shadow Dance, properly assimilating everything that he had learned to elevate his mastery of battle to a new level. He also had to relearn a lot of things to adjust to his new power as a Master, and adjust all his techniques to this new incredible reality.

One of the more valuable discoveries he made during this time was that the inherent problem he had been struggling with — the threat of losing himself to the formlessness of Shadow Dance — was easily remedied by a simple thought exercise. He just had to remember his

True Name. No matter how far gone he was, it always brought him back.

Apart from that, every single aspect of Sunny's combat ability was vastly improved by his newly profound control of shadow essence, as well as the time he had taken to fully absorb all of his rich battle experience.

Battle techniques were not the only thing he trained, though. He also dove deep into the intricacies of Shadow Manifestation, first learning how to properly wield it, and then leveraging his cunning and creativity to push its uses to their limits.

His new Ability was an incredibly versatile one, so there was a lot he could do with it. Not only did it have the potential to be powerful on its own, it could also be weaved into every other facet of his battle performance in unexpected and insidious ways. Almost every day, Sunny discovered something new he could do. The possibilities were simply limitless.

That limitlessness, however, was its own problem. Just because Sunny could do a lot did not mean that it was wise to do it. So, it took a lot of time to find the most effective and efficient ways to use Shadow Manifestation. Slowly but surely, his arsenal of true and tested tricks and methods grew.

He practiced each one until they became as instinctive as his combat techniques, so that he could use them without wasting even a split second on thinking about and concentrating on the desired result.

Lastly, there was sorcery.

After the initial breakthrough he had made in the Nightmare, Sunny spent a lot of time widening the scope of his understanding of spellweave. This was perhaps the most unassailable and tough field of expertise he was trying to study, since there was nothing and no one to teach him how to do it.

The scope and complexity of the subject were boundless, and all he could do was blindly stumble in the darkness, learning tiny bits through trial and error. It did not help that he could only experiment

with Memories, which were a rare and finite resource to him.

Sunny worked around that limitation, somewhat, by turning mundane things into Memories and experimenting on them instead. However, that produced its own obstacle — he needed soul shards to do so, and soul shards were very expensive in the real world.

And he could not procure them in the Dream Realm, for now!

To solve his resource problem, Sunny turned to the only source available to him… the merit points provided by the government, which could then be exchanged for various valuable things.

To get points and fund his research, he had compiled another paper with the help of Teacher Julius. The Exploration Report on Chained Isles, by Ascended Sunless… did not produce as big of a ripple among the general public, but caused a real explosion in the Awakened academia.

The data about all the ancient Nightmare Creatures, the culture, and the bizarre nature of the Kingdom of Hope was a true boon to the collective knowledge base of humanity. Sunny, of course, kept the most sensitive pieces of information to himself, but just what remained brought him vastly more contribution points than the report on the Forgotten Shore.

Information from Nightmares was ten times more valuable, after all, since very few people ever challenged them, and even fewer returned alive.

These contribution points, as well as other benefits and privileges he had become entitled to as a Master, allowed him to not only pour his mind and soul into studying sorcery, but also kept the Brilliant Emporium functioning without a constant influx of his hunting trophies.

Sadly, even that was not enough.

…And hence, Sunny found himself teaching young Awakened at the Academy. While that was not the best and most efficient way for a Master to earn, it was still rather profitable for someone in his

situation.

Sitting in the empty auditorium, Sunny sighed and looked at his communicator. A pale smile appeared on his face.

"She must be already here…"

Today was a special day for more than one reason.

A few days prior, Master Jet had suddenly contacted him. This was not too strange, since they interacted often in these past six months… but this time, something about Soul Reaper's voice sounded a bit off. Not exactly bad, just… different.

She had told him that she had some good news, and some bad news, and requested a face-to-face meeting to discuss an important issue.

That meeting was about to take place at the Instructor's Cafeteria.

Shaking his head, Sunny stood up, dismissed his chair, and walked to the door.

"I wonder what Master Jet has to say… gods, was there really a need for all this mystery? She made it sound as if the world is ending…"

Chapter-753: Crux of the Matter

Now that Sunny was a teacher at the Academy, he was very much looking forward to gaining access to the Instructor's Cafeteria. He remembered the last time he had eaten there in perfect detail. The food was simply to die for.

…It might have been one of the major reasons why he had accepted the job of a lecturer, to be honest.

'No, no it wasn't! I am not that shallow!'

Walking inside, Sunny glanced at the tasteful interior, gaining a new appreciation for the wooden furnishings. By now, he was not shocked every time he saw natural wood in the waking world. However, this was not just any wood… if he remembered correctly, all this lumber came from the corpse of a slain titan.

A titan killed by the great clan Valor, to be precise. Perhaps even by Anvil himself. What irony it was, to enjoy a dinner on one of the cafeteria's tables while being secretly hunted by the people who provided the titanic lumber for its creation.

With a sigh, Sunny looked around and noticed a familiar face. An exquisitely beautiful woman in a deep blue uniform sat in the corner of the cafeteria, cradling a cup of coffee in her hands. He confidently walked over and sat down across from her.

"Master Jet."

Soul Reaper Jet looked up from her cup and smiled at him.

"...Master Sunless."

'Well that… sounds weird.'

He shifted uncomfortably, not accustomed to being addressed that way… at least not by her. Although the two of them were technically of the same Rank now, Jet was still older than him. The gap between them had grown much smaller, but he still felt a lot of respect for her.

Looking at his fellow Ascended, Sunny suddenly frowned.

Master Jet… looked different today.

He was accustomed to her usual, slightly unkept and careless appearance. However, the person in front of him looked like nothing if not an exemplary officer. Her uniform was perfectly ironed and buttoned all the way, with not a single crease or blemish marring its surface. Her silver epaulets were glistening with a polished sheen. Her leather boots were freshly shined.

Her raven black hair was perfectly arranged, and her icy blue eyes were sharp and piercing.

He raised an eyebrow.

"You… uh… look nice?"

Jet's smile widened.

"Oh, this? I had to attend a… a special ceremony in the morning. Promotions are flying off the shelves in the government these days."

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Congratulations, I guess."

Soul Reaper laughed, then pushed a small alloy box toward him.

"No, no. Congratulations to you. Happy belated birthday."

He blinked a couple of times, then opened the box and looked at the glimmering soul shard that lay inside. His eyes sparked when he recognized its Ascended rank.

"Ah, this is exactly what I needed! Thank you so much! But… isn't it

too luxurious?"

A shard like that cost a lot.

Master Jet shrugged.

"Perks of being a public servant. I have more access to such things than most."

She grew silent and looked at him expectantly. For a few moments, neither of them spoke.

Finally, the Ascended beauty sighed.

"What, no present for me? I recently turned thirty, you know."

Sunny froze, then chuckled awkwardly:

"Oh. Well, in that case, dinner is on me."

Soul Reaper seemed more than happy with that arrangement.

"Ah, you know me too well, Sunny. In that case, don't mind if I do!"

Some time later, they finished their food and leaned back on their seats in satisfaction.

Master Jet took a sip of coffee and smiled:

"Credit where credit is due… you Academy people really know how to treat your staff. I am regretting my choice of career, a little."

Her voice trailed off a little, and a wistful expression appeared on her face. Then, she shook her head and finally addressed the true reason why they met today:

"Good news first. You can relax, Sunny. Valor seems to finally be ready to behave reasonably, so the worst part is over."

He inhaled deeply:

"At last! What changed?"

Master Jet shrugged.

"Well, a lot of things. But mainly, they just don't have the energy to pursue small matters anymore. The tension between the Great Clans seems to be growing, so Valor elders have a lot on their plate. That plays in your favor, because you and your cohort have managed to make yourself valuable. With Saint Tyris advocating on your behalf, everything is ready for a sincere and friendly negotiation."

Sunny frowned.

"Sincere… friendly? What about the Fire Keepers that disappeared? You might have not noticed, but the survivors of the Forgotten Shore are a tight group. To them, this is not a small matter."

She smiled.

"They are alive... although maybe not well. Their release is one of the points you and Song of the Fallen will have to negotiate. However, I don't foresee any problems with that. As long as you told the truth and neither of you had conscious plans of assisting that mysterious prisoner of theirs in the escape, everything should be fine."

A dark expression appeared on Sunny's face.

Master Jet knew the general situation, but not the details. The problem they had with the great clan Valor was very simple. Although Sunny and Cassie had caused a great deal of harm to the clan's interests, because of the lack of witnesses and Saint Tyris volunteering to act as the scapegoat, that by itself was not something intolerable.

However, the crux of the matter was that no one in the Great Clan knew if their actions had been simply the result of a misfortunate happenstance, or premeditated.

What Master Jet had just told him meant that Valor was ready to abandon their hostile paranoia and accept the version of events where neither Sunny nor Cassie had helped Mordret escape willingly, as well as grant them an unofficial pardon.

With the White Feather clan taking the responsibility for the death of

Saint Cormac, that would leave them in the clear.

However… although the great clan knew that Mordret had escaped as the result of their actions, no one except for the members of the cohort knew that he had followed them into the Nightmare. If the fact that the five of them had become Masters together ever came into the light… then, no matter what the truth was, no one would believe that the bastard simply manipulated them all!

They would all think that Sunny and Cassie were his willing allies.

So, this secret had to remain buried, forever.

Sunny grimaced.

"So what do they want?"

Master Jet shrugged.

"I can't say, really. But you have to be ready to make some concessions. Valor will probably insist on recruiting you to their side, at least in some capacity. Whether you manage to resist their forceful invitation or not depends on you."

She thought for a bit, and then added:

"What works in your favor is that you, Song of the Fallen, Nightingale, and Raised by Wolves are a package deal, as far as everyone is concerned. Valor might have ambitions of making all of you their asset, but they will probably be satisfied by ensuring that none of you becomes entangled with their opponents. Recruiting just one would make it so that the rest would not join the opposite side."

A deep scowl appeared on Sunny's face.

"...Are you telling me that we will have to sell one of us to clan Valor?"

Master Jet smiled.

"You make it sound as if becoming a member of a Great Clan is something horrible! Most Awakened would kill for such a chance,

you know? Granted, you will never be treated as a trueblood descendant, but that does not mean that they won't shower you with resources and opportunities. Probably."

Sunny remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"I know. But I... I need to think about it."

She took a sip of coffee, then leaned back.

"Well… think fast."

He looked at the beautiful Ascended with a dark expression and asked in a low tone:

"And why is that?"

Master Jet grinned.

"Well, because the representative of Valor will be here tomorrow! Your friend Cassie is coming back to the Waking World, too. You will meet here in the Academy, as it's neutral ground. So… you have until tomorrow morning to prepare for the negotiations, Sunny. Good luck!"

Chapter-754: History Lesson

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then scowled.

"What do you mean, good luck? Aren't you going to be there to mediate the negotiations?"

Master Jet took a sip of her coffee, then shook her head.

"No. While the government often serves as a neutral party and the connective tissue between the Great Clans, this is not one of those cases. Besides… I simply can't. I am being transferred out of the city. This is my last day here, for a while."

He stared at her, dumbfounded.

Master Jet… was not going to be around anymore? Sunny suddenly felt a pang of discomfort. He had grown accustomed to her being present out there somewhere... not exactly close to him, but at the same time within reach.

Noticing the expression on his face, she sighed.

"Actually, that is the second thing I wanted to talk to you about. The bad news."

Soul Reaper casually looked around, then summoned a Memory that looked like a music box. Immediately, a dome of silence appeared around them, cutting off all outside noises. Sunny frowned, confused by the need for secrecy.

She had seemed to be perfectly fine discussing private matters of a great clan in the public. What could have been more sensitive than that?

Master Jet lingered for a moment, then said:

"To be honest, Sunny, I was not going to have this conversation with you… at least not yet. But since the situation changed, and the things we are going to talk about can affect the decisions you will make tomorrow, I decided that there is no point in postponing it."

He shifted uncomfortably.

"That is… very suspenseful. What is the matter?"

She smiled, then activated her communicator and summoned a projection. It showed a map of something that looked like a big chunk of the Dream Realm. Sunny saw a lot of water and several large landmasses, each no smaller than the Forgotten Shore by the looks of it.

However, no matter how he looked, he could not find the familiar landmarks — the Hollow Mountains, Bastion, Ravenheart… either he was not as proficient at reading maps as he had thought, or he had never seen this land.

Slightly confused, he glanced at Master Jet and asked:

"Is that a previously unexplored region of the Dream Realm?"

She looked at him with a strange expression, then coughed.

"...No. That is planet Earth, you dummy."

Sunny froze in embarrassment, then looked at the image again.

'Oh… right. I am an idiot.'

Soul Reaper grinned.

"Sunny… are you one of those Awakened that know more about the Dream Realm than about the waking world?"

He cleared his throat.

"Well… it's not like I spent a lot of time in school, you know."

Her grin dimmed a little.

"Right. Sorry. Sometimes I forget how young you are… it took me a while to cover the basics after leaving the outskirts, as well."

Master Jet sighed, then pointed to the map.

"In any case, this is our world. As you can see, it is not in great shape. A few centuries ago, it looked very different… there were around twelve billion people living across it. A few million even found their way to the moon, eventually."

She sighed, then added:

"But now, there's barely three billion of us left. And we only populate four of the seven continents. Do you know which continent we are currently on? What our city is called?"

Sunny looked at her with a dark expression.

"I am not a complete fool, you know. We are in… Asia? And the city is called… wait, it has a name? I just thought it's called… uh… the city."

She rolled her eyes.

"Well, you are half-right. We are indeed in Asia, which is one of the four populated continents and one that shelters the most people. The city we live in is the largest and most populous city left on Earth. It is also the industrial, military, and administrative heart of humanity.

Around one-tenth of all humans live here… that is why while it is technically called the Northern Quadrant Siege Capital, or NQSC, people usually just refer to it as the City."

Master Jet hesitated for a moment, then said with a hint of darkness in her voice:

"Most of the surface of the planet is either uninhabitable or overrun by Nightmare Creatures, so megacities are the most convenient way to sustain a large population. However… even with spelltech and modern science, they are not capable of sustaining everyone.

Hence the outskirts, where around twenty percent of the total city

population is offloaded to slowly die out, out of the sight of the rest of humanity. But that is neither here nor there."

She sighed, and then pointed to a continent directly connected to Asia:

"This pit of desolation used to be known as Europe. It was turned completely unsuited for human life long before the Spell appeared."

Her finger trailed across a large body of water.

"This is North America. We lost it not long before you were born, when a Category Five Gate opened there. That was… a big disaster. Because of its proximity to the Gate, South America was mostly abandoned, as well. Now, we only maintain a small presence in its southernmost part. Those settlements are incredibly important, however, because that is where most of our food is produced."

Master Jet hesitated for a bit, and then gestured to a large archipelago situated below South America.

"This is Antarctica, the second most populated continent after Asia and the logistical link between the rest of the continents, connecting both hemispheres together. Believe it or not, before the Dark Times, it was covered in ice. Actually, the melting of all that ice was one of the reasons that caused the Dark Times."

She sighed.

"The sea levels across the planet rose, drowning many cities and displacing billions of people. The percentage of the landmass that was devoured by water was not too radical, but the problem was that many civilization centers were situated along the coasts. With all of them gone and billions of refugees seeking shelter, the global infrastructure collapsed.

It did not happen in an instant, of course, but quite fast. That is the danger of building a deeply interconnected society. Lack of self-sufficiency is perfectly fine and even beneficial during the good times, but makes civilizations vulnerable to cascade failure."

Soul Reaper looked at him with a grim expression.

"Which was exactly what happened. The worse things got, the more chaos there was, and the more chaos there was, the worse things got. Endless natural disasters, destruction of global infrastructure, and resource starvation led to an escalating series of wars. Orbital kinetic strikes, nuclear warfare, chemical warfare, biowarfare… in the end, everything was being used.

The planet was already in bad shape, and this was almost the last straw. In the end, the terribly reduced population achieved some form of stability… and that was when the Nightmare Spell appeared."

Master Jet shook her head.

"...Ah, but I am getting off-topic. The point is, almost all of humanity resides around the Indian Ocean today. Asia, Antarctica, Africa, and Australia are the four remaining bastions of our civilization, forming the Northern, Southern, Western, and Eastern quadrants."

Sunny listened to the impromptu lecture with interest. He knew bits and pieces of human history, of course, but mostly from them being referenced in popular culture and government propaganda… which were more often than not one and the same. Out there in the outskirts, people did not need to know a lot about the world, because their world started and ended in the outskirts.

Even the city proper seemed like a distant land. He would have had more general knowledge, of course, if he had attended school, but Sunny's formal education more or less ended when he was seven. Honestly, the fact that he knew that people lived on the outside of the planet as opposed to on the inside was already an achievement.

He had managed to become a teacher despite all that, had he not?

'Still… I probably should start educating myself on matters not having to do with the Nightmare Spell, now that I have the chance. There are plenty of people as ignorant as me, of course, but still… this is kind of embarrassing…'

Sunny looked at Jet and shifted slightly.

"Uh… thanks for the history lesson, Master Jet. But what does it have

to do with anything?"

She leaned back, smiled calmly, and answered in a relaxed tone:

"Oh, it's very simple, really. These four bastions of humanity I mentioned? They're about to become three..."

Chapter-755: Obel Scale

Master Jet's nonchalant attitude was in stark contrast with the gravity of her statement. Sunny froze for a few moments, then slowly put his cup on the table. When he spoke, his voice sounded a little hoarse:

"What?"

She sighed, then looked around the cafeteria. It was slightly surreal, to be discussing something that concerned the lives of hundreds of millions of people in the safety of this tranquil place.

Several instructors were enjoying their meals, and there were members of the staff going about their business. None of them knew of the approaching disaster. This contradiction was chilling, too.

Soul Reaper did not seem to mind.

"I have told you about the Obel Scale once, right? It is a very complicated spelltech system that the government uses to predict the appearance of Gates across the globe. Well… I was not entirely honest when I said that a bit of maintenance and calibration would solve all the problems it had been experiencing recently.

In truth, the problems we've been having with its readings are not as trivial as I implied. They are just a symptom of a much bigger problem."

Sunny's eyes widened slightly.

"Kurt… Shadow Blade Kurt. He mentioned something about the Obel Scale. It was the reason he had given up and gone mad… one of them, at least."

Master Jet nodded, an expression of mild contempt appearing on her face.

"Yes. However, Kurt was broken and weak. He really blew the issue out of proportion."

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched.

"I wouldn't call losing an entire continent a small issue."

She shrugged.

"Neither would I. But it is not the end of the world, either."

Soul Reaper calmly took a sip of coffee.

"Back when we lost North America, something similar happened. The Obel Scale went out of alignment, making its detection scope unreliable. In the end, a Category Five Gate appeared, and after that, everything went back to normal. However, a few years ago the government noticed growing irregularities in the readings again.

After studying these irregularities for some time, we came to the conclusion that something massive was going to happen again."

She pursed her lips.

"This time, it is going to be different. Instead of one gargantuan Gate, there is going to be a… a chain reaction, of sorts. Hundreds of smaller Gates are going to open in relatively quick succession, allowing countless Nightmare Creatures to invade the real world. And all that is going to take place…"

A moment of tense silence passed before she finished the sentence:

"...In Antarctica."

Sunny felt his mouth turn dry.

"But you… you just said that Antarctica is the second most populated continent on Earth."

Master Jet nodded.

"Yes. There are around nine hundred million people living there."

He remained motionless for a while, then looked away.

"...You also said that a compartmentalized global infrastructure is vulnerable to cascade failure. And that Antarctica serves as a logistical hub between the four continents and South America, where most of our food is produced."

Soul Reaper smiled.

"Indeed. However, it is not as bad as you might think. Every megacity possesses robust hydroponic agriculture and is capable of sustaining itself, to a large degree. We've learned our lessons. Yes, losing the connection to South America will be a painful blow, but humanity will survive. There will be a big change, of course… I think you have already guessed its nature.

More people will be pushed out into the outskirts. Maybe there will be thirty percent of the population living there instead of twenty. Maybe more."

Sunny still could not let go of his dismay.

"What about the millions of people living in Antarctica? What is the government doing? Can't you throw enough troops and Awakened there to contain the chain reaction?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then let out a wistful sigh.

"...Sure. If we mobilize all our forces — and I mean all of them — and get the Great Clans to fully support the operation, we might keep hold of Antarctica. However, it is not that simple. Everything has a cost, Sunny. There are three other continents we have to protect, and sending so many Awakened into the meat grinder will leave them defenseless.

After all, the fact that hundreds of Gates will open in Antarctica does not mean that they will stop appearing everywhere else. Overextending our resources to protect one quadrant will doom all of them. Even if that doesn't happen immediately, in the long term, humanity will cease to exist on Earth."

Master Jet rubbed her face, then smiled.

"That does not mean that we are going to remain idle, however. In fact, the government has been preparing a massive operation for the past two years. It's just that… the situation changed much quicker than anyone could have expected. The timetable has been brought forward by several years, at least. Our current preparations are entirely insufficient."

She grew silent, then added in a neutral tone:

"We thought that there would be much more time to get everything ready. But there isn't, not anymore. So… it's going to be a damn mess of epic proportions."

Sunny scowled, not entirely sure what that was supposed to mean. He could barely accept the fact that losing one of the four continents was an acceptable price for keeping the other three intact. Humanity had already lost North America, after all, and persisted despite the loss. It had arguably grown more powerful as the result.

But if the government was willing to let Nightmare Creatures conquer Antarctica, what operation could it be possibly planning?

"...What exactly is the government going to do?"

Master Jet turned back to the map of the Earth, lingered for a few moments, and then pointed at the large archipelago in the south.

"Why, what else? We are going to evacuate nine hundred million people from the doomed continent while a neverending horde of Nightmare Creatures is pursuing us. Or… we will try, at least. To be honest, I think that most of those who try will probably die…"

Chapter-756: Navigation

Master Jet studied the map for a few moments, and then traced a line across the ocean that lay between the four continents. Then, she suddenly asked:

"Do you know a lot about seafaring, Sunny?"

He slowly shook his head.

"As much as the next guy, I guess."

She smiled.

"Understandable. In truth, navigating the oceans is not an easy task. If it was, we could have just used the Pacific or the Atlantic to transport food from South America. But trying to sail them is pure suicide, for now."

Soul Reaper leaned back and took a sip of coffee.

"Most of our planet is covered by water, and most of that water is infested with dreadful Nightmare Creatures. That is because most Gates open underwater. And since we have very few methods of battling them below the sea — and very little reason to — we just leave those Gates be. Humanity might still hold four and a half continents, but we have surrendered all of Earth's oceans to the enemy."

She sighed, then dejectedly shook her head.

"Still, no civilization can exist without efficient transportation, and shipping cargo across water has been the mainstay of transportation since the dawn of time. So, we maintain a presence in the Indian ocean. Navigating it is not easy, however, because there are unspeakable and uncountable horrors dwelling in the depths."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then asked with a bit of curiosity:

"Wouldn't it be easier to ship stuff through space, then?"

Soul Reaper grimaced.

"It is not cost-efficient. Getting to orbit requires considerable resource commitment, more so with heavy cargo, and resources are something we desperately lack. Plus… space is rife with its own dangers."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What dangers?"

She simply shrugged.

"That… is above even my pay grade. So I don't know. Suffice it to say that simply maintaining a scattering of satellites that support the network and the Obel Scale is already a dire challenge. Whether you like it or not, water is the only way."

He frowned.

"So how do we manage to make use of the ocean if it's so dangerous?"

Master Jet smiled.

"Ah, well. The answer is pretty simple… House of Night."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"The Great Clan?"

She nodded.

"The representatives of the House of Night excel in guiding ships through turbulent waters. They are not called Nightwalkers just to honor the clan founder, after all. To move across the ocean, convoys that consist of massive, heavily armored ships employ the services of Nightwalker navigators…"

Sunny leaned back, thinking. He knew a bit about the third and the least prominent Great Clan, but not too much.

Unlike Valor and Song, which resembled most Legacy clans and had originated from a single family, House of Night was born from an alliance of several prominent clans. They resided in a dire region of the Dream Realm known as Stormsea, and controlled one of the three Great Citadels — which, as far as he knew, resembled a giant ship and was most likely left behind by one of the seven daemons.

Sunny also knew that the House of Night did not possess a Sovereign of their own. Anvil of Valor and Ki Song ruled their families, but Asterion was seemingly not related and had nothing to do with the third Great Clan.

It was not clear why the other two powers did not consume the weaker one. Now that Sunny learned of the pivotal role Nightwalkers played in sustaining human civilization, he guessed that they simply offered too much utility to be pressured into submission.

Alternatively, the nature of the region they controlled might have simply been too hazardous for either Valor or Song to invade, or their existence created a bit of much-needed balance and deterrence between the two dominant Great Clans.

…What was clear, however, was that the House of Night was deeply connected to Storm God. There were just too many coincidences between their powers and the deity of depths, oceans, darkness, stars, travel, guidance, and disaster.

Did… did Nightwalkers bear the lineage of Storm God?

'That would certainly explain a lot…'

Master Jet, meanwhile, continued:

"The scions of the House of Night allow naval convoys to reach their destinations, which is both a blessing and a curse. The problem with that situation is that while there are more Nightwalkers than there are descendants of the other two Great Clans, their number is still limited. And so, the number of convoys we can operate simultaneously is limited, as well."

She sighed.

"We can only evacuate people across water. By our calculations, it will take at least two years to evacuate the population of Antarctica that way. That is even if we commit the bulk of our navy to the operation. However…"

Her voice grew dim.

"The chain reaction is going to start in a few months, at most. It won't be too severe at the beginning, but quickly ramp up, drowning the entire archipelago in Nightmare Creatures."

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then asked:

"So what is going to happen?"

Master Jet finished her coffee and offered him a smile.

"Well… the government is going to transfer a very substantial part of its forces to Antarctica. Pretty much everyone who can be spared without leaving the rest of humanity completely defenseless will be transferred to the expeditionary force. They will try to stall the Nightmare Creatures for as long as possible to allow as many people as we can save to escape. Oh, also...

I will be on one of the first ships myself."

Sunny looked away, not knowing what to say. Master Jet herself had judged that many of those who were going to take part in the evacuation would not be coming back.

Still, she was Soul Reaper Jet, was she not? Surely, she of all people was going to be okay…

Master Jet sighed, then looked around once again. Then, she said calmly:

"Of course, that will never be enough. In a couple of months, the government will announce a voluntary mobilization, both among the Awakened and among mundane humans. Many people will answer the call, while most will not. As I've said, the loss of Antarctica is not a world-ending event. Dying there is not really worth it."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"So why are you going? With your position, I am sure that you could have chosen to stay behind. Did you let the propaganda get to your head? Honor, duty, and sacrifice… do you actually believe in that crap?"

Soul Reaper laughed.

"No. I am as cynical as you, Sunny. However, I have my own reasons."

She lingered for a few moments, and then added in a suddenly serious tone:

"...And I think that you might understand my reasoning very well. We've known each other for a while, Sunny, and I always shied away from giving you the recruitment speech. However, times have changed. So, tomorrow, when the representative of Valor tries to invite you into their great and illustrious clan, I want you to refuse."

She leaned forward, looked him in the eyes, and added:

"Instead, I want you to leave everything behind, enlist… and come with me."

Chapter-757: Professional Sensibility

It was hard not to get swept up in Master's Jet cool presence. However, Sunny was not so easy to sway. He held her gaze for a few moments, then turned away.

His expression grew somber.

"...You just spent a lot of time convincing me that losing Antarctica would not cause irreparable damage to humanity, and that most of those who go there would end up dead. And now, you suddenly want me to go as well? Why would I?"

Sure, fighting a noble and glorious war against the Nightmare Creatures sounded exciting. But Sunny was not an inexperienced kid anymore. He knew the price of glory all too well. To him, war casualties were not an abstract concept, but instead a very familiar and grim reality.

He was not arrogant and ignorant enough to consider himself immune to death.

Master Jet leaned back.

"Don't you want to defend your fellow humans?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Don't get me wrong… I really want all those people in Antarctica to survive. However, none of them helped me when I was starving to death in the outskirts. None of them were there when I was drowning in my own blood on the Forgotten Shore. The government didn't do crap to uplift me, either."

He frowned, and then added:

"In fact, one might argue that the government not only abandoned me entirely, but even did everything in its power to make sure that I die swiftly after being used up to bring it a tiny bit of benefit. Like my parents did. But, despite all that, I survived and managed to build a decent life for myself.

And now that I finally have something good going for me… you want me to throw it all away and go risk my life to maybe save a bunch a strangers?"

Master Jet sighed.

"I get it. Trust me, I do. But…"

Sunny raised his eyebrows:

"But what? I do believe that you get it. You are from the outskirts yourself, after all. Maybe your life there was not as bad as mine, but it wouldn't have been too different. So why are you going to Antarctica?"

She lingered for a few moments, then looked away.

"I guess it's hard to explain. Honor, duty, sacrifice… you're right, those words don't mean much to me. Working for the government is a means to an end. However… I do work for the government. And I take pride in my work."

Soul Reaper studied the visitors of the cafeteria with her icy blue eyes, then glanced at Sunny.

"I might not have a lot of affection for humanity, but maintaining the fragile balance that allows it to exist is something that I chose to make my responsibility. My domain. So, watching Antarctica go up in flames from the sidelines would be against my professional sensibility."

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking about what she said. He felt that, in a sense, Master Jet was very much like him. Too stubborn to give up, unwilling to let the world have its way… however, there

was a big difference between them. While Sunny aimed all that spite and resentment at surviving and elevating only himself, she had chosen something much grander as her target.

Instead of going it alone, Soul Reaper had decided to tie herself down to a much bigger whole.

Was it worth it? He did not know for sure, but felt that it wasn't. People like him and her deserved to be selfish. The world had never treated them well, and so, they had no obligation to return the favor. Dying for someone you did not care about was utter foolishness.

He looked at her and said darkly:

"But I am not in the same profession as you."

Master Jet smiled.

"True. However, I wasn't finished. My work ethic is only part of the reason why I am going to Antarctica. The other is… the future."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"The future?"

She nodded.

"Yes. The world is changing, Sunny. What happens in Antarctica might not end humanity or even change it too much. But it will change the Awakened. Think about it… with so many of us going, either as part of the initial force or as volunteer reinforcements, the power balance of the Awakened society will shift. Thousands will die, but those who survive will grow stronger."

Soul Reaper leaned forward, her voice suddenly intense:

"How many will fully saturate their cores? How many will achieve a breakthrough in their combat skill? How many will Ascend? There are less than a thousand Masters alive in the world right now. How many will there be after the battle for Antarctica? I'd wager much more than that.

How many new Saints will emerge? Everything will shift, Sunny… you can either be a part of that shift, or be left behind."

Sunny studied her face for a few moments and shrugged. Then, he asked in a somber tone:

"Are you hoping to become a Saint in all the chaos, while all the Great Clans are looking elsewhere?"

Master Jet sighed, then slowly shook her head.

"No, not really. You are mistaken if you think that their monopoly on Transcendence exists only through preventative measures. Even if you become a Saint, they still can, and will, make you disappear. Plus, entering the Third Nightmare is not something that can be done in the heat of the moment.

If you want to survive, you need years of preparation and an ocean of resources, not to mention a powerful and cohesive cohort. Jumping into a random Seed will just get you killed."

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then scowled.

"...What are the Great Clans doing about this situation, anyway? The House of Night is supplying its navigators for the navy… are they going to join the ground forces, as well? What about Song and Valor?"

Soul Reaper grimaced and shook her head.

"No. The Great Clans are staying clear from the ground operation… for now. Maybe they will join eventually, but currently, all three are withholding their forces."

His face grew dark.

"Why? Isn't protecting human lives the purpose for their existence?"

She sighed.

"It is. And they are. They just have their own thoughts on what that implies."

Master Jet hesitated for a few moments, and then added:

"The Great Clans have given up on Earth a long time ago, Sunny. Instead of trying to protect humanity's old home from falling apart, they set their gazes at building a new one. They have big plans for the Dream Realm..."

Chapter-758: Crossroad

Sunny left the Academy with a lot on his mind.

As a Master and a high ranking citizen, he had the right to acquire a PTV license and more than enough money to purchase one. However, Sunny had no idea how to control a personal transport vehicle and was too lazy to learn, so he still used public trains to move around the city.

Around the… Northern Quadrant Siege Capital.

Paying no attention to the captivated glances people threw at him, he looked into the window as the train slid forward on its magnetic guideway, flying through district after district with incredible speed.

The city… was a nice enough place, as long as you were not born in the outskirts. Tall buildings burrowed deep underground and rose high into the sky, connected by tunnels and aerial bridges into a complicated maze of graphene composite and reinforced alloy. Here and there, artificial trees and grass broke the white monotony with vibrant shades of green, yellow, orange, and red.

Everything seemed clean and bright despite the heavy snowstorms that were prevalent this time of year, not at all like the dirty, dim, poisonous clutter of the outskirts.

There were large screens displaying beautiful vistas of breathtaking landscapes that had not existed on planet Earth since centuries ago, and propaganda projections that had been masterfully designed to brighten the mood of the citizens.

…Most of all, the city seemed full of life. Endless streams of people were crowding the crosswalks, with a rare PTV or two appearing from time to time. Millions… hundreds of millions of humans called this place their home. Only here, protected by the colossal outer

barriers and protective air filtration systems, as well as powerful Awakened, could they survive and thrive.

It was strange to imagine that many similar human shelters in Antarctica were going to be abandoned and destroyed by the endless tide of Nightmare Creatures very soon.

Sunny had seen the panic and mayhem that an unexpected manifestation of a Gate could cause. However, his imagination failed when he tried to envision what the same disaster, but magnified a hundred-fold, would look like. All he could picture was the horde of abominations that the Dreamer Army had faced under the Crimson Spire suddenly appearing on these peaceful streets.

Already, that image made him shudder.

…However, he still stood by his words.

He did not owe these people anything. Sure, if a Gate opened right in front of him, Sunny would have been inclined to fight and buy the civilians time to run away. This was just human nature. But he was not going to go out of his way and seek death just to fulfill some abstract obligation. No one had helped when he had been desperate for help. He had survived despite humanity, not because of it.

And he would continue to put himself first…

Most likely.

Sunny would have lied if he said that Master Jet did not put a seed of doubt in his heart. Sure, the expedition to Antarctica seemed like a suicidal exercise in futility, but she was right. Those who survived that ordeal were going to grow much stronger.

Although Sunny would not be getting any shadow fragments from the hordes of Dormant and Awakened abominations that were going to flood the Southern Quadrant soon, he could still collect plenty of soul shards and Memories, maybe even Echoes. There would be more than enough of Fallen Nightmare Creatures roaming Antarctica, as well.

…However, he also did not believe in the government's ability to accurately predict what would happen there. They seemed to think

that only lower category Gates would appear during the chain reaction, but was that assessment right? Who could say with certainty that another Category Five Gate would not manifest itself instead?

The last time it happened, the likes of Immortal Flame and Smile of Heaven perished in the fight. Could Sunny guarantee that he would fare any better? No, he definitely could not.

In the end, it all came down to a simple choice that depended on tomorrow's negotiations.

If all went well, Sunny would regain the ability to enter the Dream Realm. There, he would be able to achieve much better results than the expedition to Antarctica could ever provide, and with much less risk.

More than that… he could even pledge allegiance to the illustrious clan Valor. By now, he had more than enough value to negotiate a supremely lucrative deal. With their training, support, and resources, becoming a Titan would not be out of the realm of possibility.

The barrier that stood between him and Transcendence would instantly disappear, too. Instead, he would be in the best position possible to attempt conquering the Third Nightmare!

Perhaps he would even be able to enhance his understanding of sorcery by leaps and bounds. Valor was widely renowned for creating incredible Memories, after all. He had also seen how proficient the representatives of the Great Clan were in using runic sorcery, back in the Night Temple. There was so much knowledge that they possessed! So much he could learn from them.

As for the fact that the Great Clans seemed to be preparing to abandon Earth in favor of the Dream Realm…

Were they even wrong?

Sunny still remembered the conversation he had had with Effie in the ruined cathedral of the Dark City. She, too, believed that the waking world was dying, and that the Dream Realm could become humanity's salvation. Her argument was… dreadful, but compelling.

In any case, if something went wrong, he would always be able to leave Clan Valor behind. Pledges of allegiance did not mean anything to Sunny, after all. As a person who abhorred the word honor, he was more than willing to betray any promise he made as long as it suited him.

Deserting a Great Clan would probably not be easy, but by then, he was going to be powerful enough to manage.

…So, if negotiations went well, he had no reason to do something as stupid as following Master Jet to Antarctica.

If they went poorly, however, that would be pretty much his only choice.

That was why Sunny had not given Soul Reaper a definitive answer. She did not ask for one, anyway. Master Jet had just told him to think about her offer and inform her of his decision during the next two months.

As the train approached the terrace district, Sunny sighed and headed for the exit.

'Damn… my head hurts. Why did all of it have to happen on the day of my first lecture? That's too much excitement for one day!"

Worse still, tomorrow promised to be even more exciting…

Chapter-759: New Developments

Sunny continued to ponder as he walked from the train station to his home. Once there, he opened the door and walked inside, then sat down in the living room and stared at the wall for a while.

'This is not good.'

Right now, he was supposed to be mentally preparing for tomorrow's meeting with the representative of Valor. Antarctica or not, these negotiations had the potential to decide the course of his life… maybe even whether or not he was going to live at all.

The sudden revelation of the impending disaster discombobulated him, making it hard to concentrate on the immediate issue.

Facing the emissary of Valor… was going to be a delicate dance. Sunny was helped by the fact that he had never intended to set Mordret free. However, he was not entirely innocent, either… after all, he had sided against Welthe and Pierce, even slaying one of the two Knights of the great clan with his own two hands.

Not to mention that Mordret had followed him into the Nightmare and Ascended.

Sunny had many things to hide... but could not lie. Even though he was confident in his ability to twist the truth with misleading answers, the negotiations could still derail really quickly.

'Whatever. As if anyone would believe that an Awakened like me was able to kill one of the famed Knights of Valor…'

Now that Sunny had become a Master himself, he lost most of his ability to feign weakness. However, no one but his closest friends

knew how powerful he really was, and especially had been. This was another fact that played to his advantage.

'It all depends on the emissary and how they conduct themselves.'

If Valor sent someone cavalier and arrogant, Sunny would be able to dance circles around them. He had plenty of practice dealing with haughty individuals, after all.

If they sent someone smart, however… that could be a problem.

Sunny stared at his shadow, then sighed and stood up.

He really hoped that everything would go smoothly tomorrow, but it paid to be prepared. Worst case scenario, he was going to have to join the Fire Keepers in their Dream Realm exile for a while. So… unless he wanted to return to a monotonous diet of eating nothing but monster meat, it was best to prepare a few things.

Soon, a big metal chest appeared in front of him, then opened its heavy lid, revealing rows of massive triangular fangs.

…Covetous Coffer had changed after the Second Nightmare, as well.

The [Mendacious Coffer] enchantment allowed it to mimic the form of any inanimate object, but was limited by Sunny's core capacity. Now that he was an Ascended, the capacity of his cores increased tremendously, so there were a lot of options.

Sunny had experimented with the form of the Coffer a lot in the past six months. He had made it into all kinds of things, from alloy safes to leather armchairs and sleeping pods. He had even made it into a refrigerator once. However, after having fun with it for a bit, Sunny came to the conclusion that not all forms suited the Memory well.

Items that already had the function of storing things worked the best. So, he ended up simply turning it into a large chest of reinforced alloy.

Now that the Covetous Coffer had grown up, its size and strength were enough to make the [Lurid Trunk] enchantment truly dangerous. If before the small box could only bite off a few fingers,

now it could swallow a potential thief whole.

The [Capacious Chest] enchantment had grown stronger, as well, vastly increasing the Coffer's storage capacity. Now, it could store an entire room's worth of items. The [Locomotive Chiffonnier], meanwhile, did not change a lot, but due to its new size, the chest could move around much faster.

…In fact, the Coffer was now large enough for Sunny to sit on top of it, using the Memory as a bizarre mount. In that regard, it was not too different from the original Mordant Mimic, whom Sunny had ridden all the way down to the Ebony Tower once.

Not that he wanted to repeat the experience!

And speaking of mounts…

If there was one thing that had really frustrated Sunny in the past few months, it was that he had no opportunity to learn how to properly ride Nightmare. He had even ordered a custom-made saddle from an exclusive leatherwork boutique.

The mundane professionals working there often received commissions to create various harnesses for Echoes of all shapes, so they were used to strange requests… and since only wealthy Awakened possessed Echoes, their prices weren't cheap. The cost only ballooned when Sunny had to sacrifice a precious soul shard to turn the saddle into a Memory.

And yet, it had all been to no avail. Sunny was unable to travel to the Dream Realm, and summoning the dreadful steed to move around the city would not have been too convenient. Even if he did not mind attracting the wrong kinds of attention, there surely were laws and regulations in place to prevent exactly that.

…It was not all bad, though.

As a terror, Nightmare possessed an ability similar to that of a tyrant. In his case, the stallion accumulated literal nightmares instead of corporeal minions, and the more of them he ruled, the more his power grew. Eventually, the dark destrier was supposed to unlock his

final ability, [Dream Curse], by gathering an army of a thousand nightmares.

Sunny had not known where to find these phantasms or how to create them, but the six months of idleness allowed him to figure it out.

There were two ways: Nightmare could either create his dream minions, or subjugate them.

Creating one was not easy. First, the black steed had to sow a seed of terror into an enemy's soul. If the enemy escaped and the seed took root, they would be haunted by the memories of the dreadful destrier and see him in their dreams. The weaker the will of the victim was, the more chances there were for the nightmare to grow and become more and more potent.

However, a brave person would cause the seed to wither and die.

Eventually, if the nightmare fully formed, the stallion would be able to use his [Dreamwalker] Attribute to harvest it.

The second way was also troublesome. The black steed could travel into the dreams of powerful beings and subjugate their own nightmares. In the waking world, that meant Ascended. However, that task was not easy — the more powerful the dreamer, the more powerful the nightmares haunting them were. To subjugate such a nightmare, the Shadow had to defeat it in battle inside the dream.

Nightmare had returned severely wounded more than once from such battles.

Still, he managed to gather several minions that way. Neither of them faced any real enemies since returning to the waking world, so for now there was no other option.

…Sunny gathered a bunch of supplies and stored them in the Covetous Coffer, then dismissed the Memory and sighed. Accumulating a thousand nightmares for his Shadow was not going to be easy. Maybe he should have accompanied the black steed into other people's dreams. However, there were enough things haunting

him already. He did not need to experience someone else's fears, as well.

Getting close to sleeping Masters was also rather perilous...

At that moment, one of his shadows noticed a familiar figure walking toward the door.

Sunny checked the time and smiled.

"Oh, she's already here. My favorite pupil is nothing if not punctual!"

Chapter-760: Valuable Lesson

In the underground dojo beneath Sunny's home, steel was ringing against steel.

Rain was moving with a speed and precision unusual for a mundane girl of her age. Her nascent battle style was grounded, calculated, and sharp, merging steady defense with unexpected and explosive attacks. The heavy training blade sang in her hands, cutting the air as if it possessed an actual edge.

The awkwardness of youth was almost gone from her body, ceding to the promise of maturity. She was much more fit and in charge of her physicality, as well, fighting with confidence and poise that would have left most of her privileged classmates consumed by envy.

As much as Sunny wanted to, he could not boast that her progress was all thanks to him.

Currently, he was facing his little sister, deflecting her blows with one hand while keeping another in his pocket. No matter what Rain did, the soft alloy stick he was holding seemed to be impenetrable, inevitable, and unbreakable. All her attacks crashed and shattered against it, and all her defenses seemed useless against her tutor's lazy movements.

Time after time, the stick suddenly shot forward and hit her on the shoulder, bounced off of her forehead, or stung her hands. Nevertheless, the girl did not allow herself to get frustrated and continued to exert herself without losing concentration.

It was that will, cool mind, and meticulous discipline that had allowed Rain to advance so fast.

'Not bad…'

Sunny deflected another swift attack, stepped forward, and poked the girl in the chest with the tip of his stick.

"Here. You're dead. Again. Ah… I'm tired of fighting a corpse. Let's stop!"

Rain jumped back and grew still, breathing heavily as drops of sweat rolled down her pale face. She did not, however, lower her blade. Sunny had taught her the peril of lowering one's guard a long time ago.

...Those bruises took a long time to heal.

He grinned, then scratched his back with the stick and offered her the Endless Spring. After the girl was done quenching her thirst, Sunny sat down on the floor and asked in a commanding tone:

"Where did I hit you?"

Rain sat down, too, and answered steadily:

"Head, right shoulder, right hand, left forearm, chest, right thigh, left shoulder, head, neck, left shoulder, left hand, chest, head, chest."

He smiled with satisfaction:

"When did I put my hand in the pocket?"

She frowned.

"...After hitting me on the thigh for the first time."

Sunny nodded.

"In which direction was I looking two hits before that?"

Rain gritted her teeth.

"Up! You were rolling your eyes!"

He chuckled.

"Good. Your awareness is… sufficient, for that stage."

The young girl threw a menacing look at him, then turned away. After a few moments, she sighed and suddenly asked:

"Sunny... am I any good?"

Sunny hesitated, then shrugged.

"You're doing alright."

Rain remained silent for a while.

"But not as good as you were, right?"

That caused Sunny to laugh.

"What? No… you are way better than I was! I had not even seen a sword before my First Nightmare, let alone held one. In fact, when I got a chance to arm myself with a sword there, I chose to drop it. Because it was too heavy."

Rain turned to him with surprise.

"What? Then how did you survive?"

Sunny thought for a bit, then shrugged.

"Well… I strangled one enemy with a chain. Poisoned two more. Fed the last one to a Nightmare Creature, and then simply got lucky. I guess you can say that I just survived out of spite."

He hesitated, and then added:

"Actually, that is a very important lesson. I've told you before… sure, knowing how to wield a weapon is important. But having a mind that is more dangerous than a weapon is paramount. The world is a vicious place, Rain. You have to be vicious too. To survive."

Rain was going to turn sixteen in a few months. In fact, she would probably celebrate her birthday not long after the first Gates start opening in Antarctica… after that, his little sister would be vulnerable to the Nightmare Spell, as well.

That was another factor he had to consider.

Leaving with Master Jet meant leaving Rain, too...

Granted, he had already taught her most of what he could without resorting to more drastic measures. Rain was more prepared to face the First Nightmare than he had ever been. Or most people, even. Very few kids ever received the chance to be trained by an Ascended, let alone one with as much battle experience as Sunny, or possessed as much talent as Rain.

He glanced at her, lingered for a moment, and then asked:

"Do you want to be an Awakened?"

The girl hesitated for a long time, then slowly shook her head, surprising him.

"No… I don't know. I really want to be able to protect my family. But I don't want to be away from them. Or die. I had an older brother, you know…"

Sunny almost flinched, but forced himself to remain still. An expression of mild curiosity appeared on his face.

"Oh?"

Rain remained silent for a bit, then sighed.

"My mom and dad had a son, before adopting me. He got infected by the Spell, and died. I don't think they'll be able to bear it if I die, too."

Sunny looked away. A few moments later, he said:

"Sorry to hear that."

The girl shrugged, then looked at him with a frown:

"What is up with you today, anyway? You're all… serious."

Sunny smiled.

"Really? Well… I got an important day tomorrow. Besides, I gave my

first lecture today. Shaping young minds is a very serious matter!"

Rain giggled with vindication.

"Ah. So more people are going to suffer just like me. That makes me feel better!"

She smiled, then patted him on the shoulder.

"That's good. I thought you were still moping around because Effie is not around that much, anymore."

Sunny looked at her with outrage:

"Moping around? I never moped around!"

…To be honest, he did feel a bit sad that his friends were out and about living their lives. The house seemed awfully quiet now that the boisterous huntress was gone most days.

After the four of them had returned from the Second Nightmare, Effie got a bit drunk on having a healthy body. She greedily dove into all the things she never had a chance to do growing up as a disabled person. Since Cassie was indisposed and Sunny did not want to show his face in public, the government was very clingy in making her attend all kinds of events, as well.

Now, the huntress only returned home once every week or two, and then disappeared the next day again.

Kai got it even worse. Due to the nature of his new Ability, he could not perform music anymore — it would have been strange to sing to crowds of people, knowing that his voice could literally mesmerize them. The famous idol group Night&Gale announced their retirement, with Gale launching a very successful solo career and Kai transitioning to acting for the betterment of humanity as an Ascended.

At least that was how his agency spun his sudden decision.

Now, the government paraded Kai around like a paragon of the human race. Cassie, Effie, and he had already been venerated as

heroes after the Forgotten Shore, but after becoming Masters at such a young age, their celebrity rose a whole another level. So, he did not have a lot of free time, either.

Both Effie and Kai were in a strange position. They had nothing to do with the events of the Night Temple, but also could not — and would not — move on with their lives until Sunny and Cassie resolved their issues with Clan Valor.

In truth, Sunny himself had told them to stay away from him, for now.

Still… he missed their company.

'That is alright. This whole mess will end tomorrow, one way or another.'

He sighed, and then turned to Rain:

"You did well today. Keep it up. Now, go home before your parents call me again! The last time they very politely tried to explain to me that you have homework to do and I was keeping you too long was very awkward for all of us, you know?"

Rain laughed, then stood up and headed for the elevator.

"Alright. But... next time we spar, I am going to get you at least once! You'll see!"

Soon, she was gone, leaving him alone in the dimly lit dojo.

Sunny sighed and looked at his shadows.

After a while, he said quietly:

"As long as Rain is on Earth, those damned Sovereigns better not leave Earth behind… otherwise, the great clans and I are going to have a problem…"

Chapter-761: Burning Candles

The next morning, Sunny approached the massive red gates of the Academy and stood there for a few moments, looking at the countless thousands of candles that burned in front of the deep moat surrounding it. Their flames swayed and shone through the falling snow, turning into a beautiful sea of orange radiance.

Back when the Dreamer Army had suddenly returned from the Forgotten Shore, raising a storm with their unexpected resurrection, people started placing these candles in front of the Academy for the one who had stayed behind… the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan, Changing Star. Some believed that Nephis would not die as long as at least one candle continued to burn.

As long as it burned, the Immortal Flame would not be extinguished.

Now, two years later, the number of candles had not diminished one bit. In fact, there were more of them than ever. Changing Star's legend had not only remained alive, but continued to grow and spread.

At first, the candles might have been just a desperate gesture by those who hoped against all odds that she would remain alive, but with each day that Nephis somehow defied death and continued to persevere, alone in the cursed darkness of the Dream Realm, her fame and influence rose.

No one could explain how she was managing to survive in the desolate, lightless abyss of the Forgotten Shore, but she undoubtedly had not succumbed to its indescribable horrors. Sunny knew it better than anyone... but others knew, as well.

The government was not shy about fanning the flames of the misguided fervor and using Nephis to fuel the propaganda machine, painting her as the symbol of the noble and unbreakable spirit of

humanity. It was easy for them to confirm that Changing Star still lived, after all. Unlike those who turned Hollow, someone like her showed signs of brain activity similar to that of a dreaming person.

So, they did not even have to invent false proof.

...By now, there were at least a hundred thousand burning candles placed in front of the Academy, where she slept in a heavily protected underground chamber.

Sunny sighed, then shifted his gaze to a delicate silhouette kneeling in front of the candles. Cassie lit one of her own, waited until some wax melted and flowed to the ground, then placed the candle near the others and stood up.

She was wearing civilian clothes. Her attire was tidy and mundane, but despite that, no one could mistake her for an ordinary person. The solemn and otherworldly beauty of the blind girl surrounded her like an invisible barrier, making a few people who came to light their own candles stay away, looking at her with stunned reverence.

Not paying them any attention, Sunny scowled a little and walked over. As he approached, it seemed as though the shadows of the burning candles grew a little deeper.

"Welcome back to the real world. When did you arrive?"

Cassie lingered for a moment, then turned to him and smiled a little.

"Just a few minutes ago. My tether is here, in the Academy."

Sunny nodded.

As Masters, they were able to travel to the Dream Realm physically and at will. Once there, they were still bound to a Gateway anchor, and had to use it to return to the real world.

However, at the same time as their connection to the Dream Realm had grown stronger, their connection to the waking world had become a little less absolute. To return, each Ascended had to create a tether — an intangible mark that served as their beacon on the return journey. They would appear at the spot where their tether was

placed.

Creating or moving a tether was not too hard, but required some time. Sunny's own was situated in the dojo below his home, but Cassie had to choose where to place hers more carefully. Ambushing a Master at the moment of their return was the best way to catch them in their weakest state. So, the supremely defended Academy was a good choice.

He looked at Cassie with some concern, then asked:

"How… how have you been?"

The young woman smiled.

"Not too bad. We've been busy these last six months. Exploring the Ivory Tower, restoring the flying ship to its true glory… now that I had studied it at its prime, there is a lot more we can do."

Sunny knew that Cassie had spent a lot of time learning from Noctis about his remarkable ship. It seemed that she was putting these lessons to good use.

His face darkened a little.

"...Are you still planning to take it over the Hollow Mountains?"

The blind girl sighed.

"Yes… maybe. The Fire Keepers are still too weak to make that journey. But, perhaps… perhaps today's negotiations will change things. Clan Valor knows more about the Hollow Mountains than anyone else, after all."

Sunny scoffed.

"And you think they will just share that knowledge with you?"

Cassie lingered for second, then weakly shrugged.

"Why not? Now that Saint Cormac is dead, someone has to continue his mission."

She hesitated for a bit and asked:

"If we do go… will you come with us?"

Sunny laughed.

"I don't know. Gods… why does everyone suddenly want me to come with them these days?"

Cassie faced him and remained silent for a few moments. Then, she simply said:

"Because you are strong."

Sunny looked at her with a faint smile, then turned away.

"I guess I am. Anyway… are you ready for the negotiations? Things can go really bad for us, you know."

The blind girl nodded and turned her back to the sea of glowing candles.

"...I know."

As she said that, a luxurious black PTV appeared in view, stopping some distance away. Its door slid open, and the representative of the great clan Valor stepped out onto the pavement.

When Sunny saw who it was, his face fell.

He gritted his teeth.

'Crap…'

Of all people... why did it have to be her?

Chapter-762: Negotiations

The young woman that exited the PTV looked sharp in a perfectly tailored, elegant business suit. It was entirely black, with buttons and cufflinks forged out of silver steel. Her hands were protected from the cold by leather gloves, and her raven black hair moved slightly in the wind.

With alabaster skin and a slender figure, the young woman looked both beautiful and daunting. She resembled a lethal blade, and that impression was only exacerbated by the cold gaze of her striking, strange, vermilion eyes…

Morgan of Valor had come to represent her clan herself.

Sunny silently cursed.

This was… more or less the worst-case scenario. Now that a direct descendant of Anvil of Valor appeared to conduct the negotiations in person, his chances of fooling anyone dropped significantly.

Not to mention that his heart suddenly ached, as if remembering the pain of being ripped out of his chest by Morgan's slender hand. Even though that unfortunate incident had happened in the illusory Dreamscape, the memory of pain was very real.

…Much worse than that, Sunny couldn't help but shiver when he realized how strongly Morgan resembled her older brother. The resemblance was almost uncanny. It was as though he was staring at a slightly younger, female version of Mordret.

That made him deeply uncomfortable.

Morgan looked up at the crushing mass of the Academy's gates, then glanced at the sea of candles with curiosity, and walked forward. Stopping in front of Sunny and Cassie, she offered them a polite smile

and said in her low, raspy voice:

"Master Sunless. You look… familiar. Have we met before?"

If Sunny was in a bad mood before, now it turned really vile. Of all the questions out there, why did she have to ask that one?!

He hesitated for a moment, then answered indifferently:

"Not face to face. I once saw you from afar, during one of the Dream Tournaments. I doubt you got a good look at me, though."

…He also saw her up close, but she did not need to know that!

Morgan seemingly lost interest and turned to Cassie.

"Song of the Fallen. It's an honor to meet you."

Although her tone was not too deferential, she was treating the blind girl with a bit of respect. Anyone with a True Name deserved acknowledgment, even from a scion of a great clan.

Cassie nodded.

"Master Morgan."

The daughter of Valor smiled.

"Ah. So I don't need to introduce myself."

With that, she turned away and looked at the red gates of the Academy again. By now, the massive drawbridge had already started to move, slowly lowering itself to allow them entry.

Morgan's face became a little wistful.

"This is the Awakened Academy, then... I've always wanted to attend. Sadly, that was never in the cards for me."

Sunny glanced at her with a bit of confusion.

"Why not?"

The young woman lingered for a moment, then looked at him with a disturbingly familiar pleasant smile.

"I've been trained by the best of the best since I was a child. There was nothing the Academy could offer me that I did not already have. Spending time here would have just been wasteful."

She paused for a moment and sighed slightly.

"...Still. I used to love dramas and webtoons about the Academy. It's a shame."

Morgan watched as the heavy metal bridge fell into the special grooves in the ground and grew still after a series of loud clicks. Then, she looked at Sunny and asked:

"Would you mind giving me a small tour? I hear that you are a lecturer now."

Of all the possible ways he had imagined the negotiations to start… this was not one of them.

Sunny hesitated, then shrugged.

"Yeah, sure. Why not? Follow me."

***

The Academy was something of a city within a city. It was self-sufficient and well-protected. The whole complex was surrounded by a deep moat and a wall of armored alloy that was tall and durable enough to slow down an attacking titan. Here and there, automated turrets of the air protection dome could be seen, their large-caliber barrels aimed at the sky.

Sunny, Cassie, and Morgan of Valor walked for a few minutes before approaching a low, modern building with white walls. He pointed at it and said with little enthusiasm in his voice:

"This is the Sleeper Compound. Most of it is underground, of course. Usually, there is a lot of activity inside and around it, but this soon after the solstice, there are no Sleepers around. The first batch is

going to be inducted in a week or two."

When he was done talking, Cassie added:

"There are a few private academies here and there, but only one Awakened Academy. The government brings all willing Sleepers to this compound, no matter what Quadrant they are from. On an average year, around a thousand young men and women prepare for their first venture into the Dream Realm here."

Morgan studied the Sleeper compound for a bit, then asked with a smile:

"So, is it as lively and boisterous as it is portrayed in the dramas? Do Sleepers really get to all kinds of shenanigans, develop lifelong friendships and bitter rivalries, and go on risky adventures?"

Her raspy voice sounded genuinely curious.

Sunny laughed dryly.

"...I don't know. We are the last two people you should be asking that, honestly. Not only did we spend only a month here, we were also both at the absolute bottom of the rankings. Everyone treated us as walking corpses."

Morgan looked at him, then said:

"And yet, here you are. Only three years later, both alive and Ascended."

He glanced at Cassie, then grinned.

"Yes. Life can be funny that way, sometimes."

They proceeded to walk around the Academy for some time. Since Sunny knew it much better than Cassie due to his research assistant position, he did most of the talking. He showed Morgan around, explaining the purpose of various compounds and buildings, while she listened with interest and asked questions from time to time.

All in all, Morgan of Valor seemed really… friendly.

That was the danger of it, however.

Sunny did not miss the fact that the more he talked, the more information about himself he was giving away, and the harder it was to keep his guard up. Although the daughter of the great clan seemed pleasant and well-meaning, the truth of it was that every one of her words was calculated and served a purpose.

His worst fears were coming true. The emissary clan Valor sent was not some arrogant, cavalier fool. Instead, they sent a lethal princess with eyes so sharp that her gaze could almost cut skin.

Although Morgan had not made it apparent… the negotiations had already started.

Chapter-763: Dangerous Questions

They were walking past a painfully familiar building when the realization that the complicated dance of negotiating with the great clan had already begun hit him.

As his face grew a little dim, Sunny lingered for a moment and then gestured at the building:

"This is the hospital complex of the Academy. It is one of the best medical institutions humanity has to offer, combining state-of-the-art tech with ingenious spelltech, as well as employing many Awakened with actual healing Aspects. This is also where Sleepers enter the sleeping pods to venture into the Dream Realm. I myself spent about a year in one of them."

He paused, and then added:

"This is where many of the Hollow are kept, as well."

Morgan looked at the alloy walls of the complex. A few moments later, she suddenly asked:

"This is also where Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan is currently being kept, isn't it?"

Did Sunny imagine it, or was her voice suddenly a bit more cutting?

He frowned.

"She is not Hollow. But yes. Oh, by the way… can we cut the crap?"

Morgan looked at him with a cold smile.

"...What do you mean?"

Sunny met her intimidating gaze without flinching. If he wanted, his dark eyes could be as cold and oppressive as hers.

In fact, the complete absence of fear or apprehension in their black depths was perhaps more frightening.

"I doubt that you are really interested in sightseeing. Let's not waste time."

Morgan studied him for a moment, then chuckled.

"As you wish, Master Sunless. Let us get the formalities out of the way first, then."

She pierced him with a sharp gaze and asked:

"Did you come to the Night Temple with the intent to set its prisoner free?"

Sunny knew that the daughter of Valor had to have plenty of Memories on her to discern whether the answers provided to her were true or not. Not that he could lie even if he wanted to…

He looked at her with a deep scowl and uttered through gritted teeth:

"Of course not! If I knew, I would have stayed as far away from your damned Citadel as possible. I didn't even know that it was a prison, let alone had plans of breaking the bastard free."

Morgan lingered for a moment, then turned to Cassie:

"What about you, Song of the Fallen?"

The blind girl's face grew dark.

"You have no reason to trust our motives, true, but at least don't disrespect our intelligence. If we really wanted to set that monster free, we would have found a way to do so without getting stuck inside the trap with him, don't you think? Both Sunny and I only escaped that disaster alive because of Saint Tyris. If she had not happened to be nearby, we'd be dead… or worse."

Morgan tilted her head a little, then suddenly smiled.

"Alright! I believe you. Still… intentional or not, the two of you caused great harm to clan Valor."

Sunny inwardly sighed.

Just like that, the hardest part of the negotiations seemed to be over. Now, the long and arduous process of bargaining was about to begin. The end result was still very much unclear.

Sunny and Cassie had to withstand the pressure and exert some in return. Aside from deciding their own fates, they also had to secure the release of the captured Fire Keepers, as well as negotiate other favorable terms.

That… was not going to be easy, especially against someone like Morgan. The most important part was to make sure that they would be the ones setting the tone and cadence of the negotiation, as opposed to following what their opponent said.

They had to go on the offensive.

He forced out a confident smile.

"Can we not do that? Assigning blame is fun and all, but let's be honest… clan Valor needs us more than we need clan Valor."

Morgan raised an eyebrow.

"Do we? What makes you say that?"

Sunny shrugged.

"We might not have helped that maniac escape, but that doesn't mean that he did not have help… or that he is not trying to find help as we speak. In fact, he might be having an identical negotiation with one of your enemies right now. He doesn't have fifty of the most talented Awakened of this generation backing him, though."

Morgan's eyes grew even colder than before, making him shiver a little.

"Oh? What do you think about that, Song of the Fallen?"

She turned to Cassie, but strangely, the blind girl was not there.

At some point, she seemed to have fallen behind. Cassie was standing a few meters away from them, still facing the hospital complex.

She was as pale as a ghost.

As a dark premonition suddenly grasped his heart, Sunny quickly stepped toward her and asked, his voice ringing with tension:

"Cassie? What is it? What's wrong?"

The blind girl remained silent for a few moments. Her hand suddenly moved, as if trying to find the pommel of the Quiet Dancer.

Then, still facing the hospital, she opened her mouth and whispered:

"Fire…"

…In the next moment, the ground beneath their feet quaked.

***

Deep underground, in a heavily protected room, a sleeping pod was glowing softly in the darkness.

Inside, a young woman with silver hair slept, her face pale and still.

Then, however, her eyes suddenly began to move beneath the eyelids, as if she was experiencing a terrible nightmare. A strange heat suffused the air.

A split second later, something flashed.

The room was instantly engulfed in furious flames.

The armored door flew off its hinges and melted in the air, turning into a spray of liquid metal. The reinforced alloy walls cracked. The sleeping pod was violently torn to pieces.

The force of the explosion was so dreadful that a destructive

shockwave rolled through the whole level, causing incredible damage. Loud alarms screamed, and as the lights went off, emergency lamps ignited, drowning the burning corridors in a dim red glare.

That light was almost instantly outshined by the angry glow of the spreading fire, however.

…In just a couple of seconds, the most protected level of the hospital complex was utterly devastated.

Chapter-764: Spirit of Flame

A sea of white flame was spreading across the devastated underground level, hungrily devouring everything it could touch. Darkness, the red glare of the emergency lamps, and the searing white radiance mixed together, creating a hectic atmosphere of chaos and mayhem. Dust and smoke suffused the scorching air.

Soon, the fire suppression systems came online, drowning the burning corridors in water and film-forming foam. The flames slowed down, but did not retreat. Instead, clouds of boiling steam flooded the underground level, reducing the already abysmal visibility even further.

The alarms continued to scream, summoning the security forces of the Academy to the site of the explosion.

And at the center of it all…

A radiant figure slowly rose from the white flames, wreathed in blinding light. The flame ghost — or whatever the being was — seemed beautiful and pure, as if untouched by the imperfections of the world. It possessed the graceful silhouette of a slender young woman, but also seemed… completely, utterly inhuman.

As fire swirled around the figure without causing it any harm, the radiant creature slowly looked around, as if disoriented. Then, it took an unsteady step forward.

At that point, more of the automated systems of the hospital complex finally activated. A cracked alloy plate shot down from the ceiling, and a compact security turret deployed itself from a hidden nest.

Despite the low visibility and the damaged status of many of the cameras and sensors installed in the ravaged room, it received enough telemetry to identify the presence of a dangerous and

unidentified being. It only took the turret a split second to take aim.

The radiant figure sharply turned its head and stared at the twin barrels, confused.

A moment later, the turret roared, spitting a stream of hundreds of high-caliber rounds at the intruder. Each was powerful enough to pierce an armored vehicle clean through.

None of them managed to wound the fire-wreathed apparition, however.

The white flames suddenly surged, wrapping around the radiant being like an armor. The tungsten bullets fruitlessly ricochetted off the creature's naked skin, melting as they hit the walls. The being swayed, and then threw a hand up.

In the next moment, a sliver of fire separated from the blaze, streaked through the air, and hit the turret. Another explosion rattled the complex. The turret was obliterated in an instant, and the section of the ceiling around it completely disappeared, revealing the torn lattice of reinforced alloy above.

Different security measures were already deploying, however.

More importantly, the Awakened charged with defending the hospital had already arrived.

Two teams of experienced warriors appeared from both sides of the level, closing in on the epicenter of the explosion with speed. Every member was clad in heavily enchanted armor and wielded powerful Memory weapons.

Before the radiant figure could react, a silver javelin hit it in the back, biting deep before melting and disintegrating in a rain of sparks. A warrior in polished plate armor appeared nearby, delivering a crushing downward blow of his battle axe.

It did not matter.

A moment after the silver javelin disappeared, the deep wound on the creature's back closed itself. Instead of being cut by the enchanted

battleaxe, it simply raised a hand and blocked the crescent blade with its forearm.

The sharp edge failed to break the being's skin.

Behind the visor of the helmet, the Awakened warrior who wielded the axe paled.

He had caught a glimpse of the creature's radiant face, and felt the immolating wrath and ruthless killing intent burning in its eyes.

The radiant figure moved, grabbing the man by the throat. The steel of his powerful Memory armor melted, and the flesh beneath it blackened. The warrior screamed. Before he was dealt a mortal wound, however, the creature shifted and threw his body at the advancing security officers of his cohort.

There were thirteen Awakened left to deal with the invader, each an experienced, well-equipped combatant and a master of their craft.

But the flame apparition was just too tyrannical.

It cut through their ranks as if dealing with mere insects. No amount of skill, no amount of powerful Memories and devastating Aspect Abilities could slow it down, let alone damage it. Faced against such an overwhelming adversary, not even the perfect synergy of the security team could play a role.

All the Awakened managed was to cover each other and save their wounded comrades from being killed by the unstoppable monster. Their ability to resist, however, was running out.

Soon, they were going to start dying.

What was worse, the whole battle only took a dozen seconds. That was not nearly enough time for reinforcements to arrive…

Or so the desperate Awakened thought, before a swift shadow suddenly appeared in their midst.

***

Sunny rolled out of the shadows and coughed, feeling terrible heat, smoke, and scalding steam assault him. He had used Shadow Step to jump to the underground level of the hospital complex almost as soon as the ground trembled, and only had time to summon the Undying Chain.

As the dull steel armor and a couple of other Memories finished manifesting themselves, he tried to take in the sight of the devastated interior and shuddered.

'Gods…'

He could not see much, but his shadow sense told a terrifying tale. It seemed as if a series of explosions had rolled through this hallway, cracking the walls, the floor, and the ceiling. There were fires burning all around, despite the streams of water and foam being discharged by a few parts of the fire-suppression systems that remained intact.

…White. White fire.

He also saw the sorry state of the Awakened security team and the radiant figure rampaging between them.

From the looks of it, the officers were not going to last long…

"Back! Retreat! I'll handle it!"

Enhanced by the [Sonorous] enchantment of the Extraordinary Rock, his voice boomed in the scorching, fire-infused darkness. Not daring to disobey the authority in his order, the Awakened did not make him ask twice. Grabbing their wounded, they hastily disengaged from the combat and ran.

At the same time, Sunny dashed forward.

His heart was beating like crazy.

'Can't be… can't…'

Because of all the fire and the damage done to the ventilation system, there was not a lot of oxygen left in the air. It was hard to breathe…

Following his will, the shadows suddenly moved and rose from the ground. Instead of touching the incandescent flesh of the radiant being and turning to ash, they swiftly formed a sphere around it and then solidified, turning into a large black orb.

That orb was durable enough to hold…

White cracks appeared on the surface of the shadow cage, which then exploded into charred pieces.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'How?! That was an Ascended cage!'

He closed in on the radiant being, allowing the Shadow Lantern to devour all the light around and submerge the hallway in absolute darkness.

For a moment, everything became black.

…And then, two furious white eyes ignited in the blackness. A moment later, a white silhouette became visible again, surrounded by a blinding glow. That glow pushed against the darkness, on the verge of vanquishing it.

However, Sunny was already near the radiant figure.

He could attack it freely.

But he did not.

An incandescent hand shot forward, aimed at his throat. Sunny allowed it to grab his forearm, instead. A terrible pressure and heat descended on his arm, slowly turning the steel of the Undying Chain bright orange. He could feel his flesh beneath it starting to burn.

But he still did not attack.

Instead, Sunny dismissed his helmet and looked straight at the flame apparition.

"Stop!"

His arm was in a sea of blazing pain.

Refusing to move, Sunny looked at the beautiful radiant face in front of him.

"Stop! It's me!"

Slowly, a vague hint of recognition appeared in the burning white eyes of the radiant monster. The blinding light emanating from her skin dimmed a little.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Changing Star!"

Her hand trembled. The stark inhumanity of her face grew less frightening.

The apparition opened its mouth.

Her voice was hoarse and awkward, as if covered in rust after not being used for a long, long time:

"...S—Sunny?"

He forced out a pale smile.

"It's me! Snap out of it, damn it!"

The radiant figure — Nephis — froze. Slowly, the light suffusing her skin dimmed, and then became extinguished.

The fire devouring the underground level weakened, too, allowing the fire suppression systems to douse it.

Standing naked amidst the devastation caused by her, Changing Star stared at Sunny with a confused expression.

Then, she suddenly swayed, and fell down.

Sunny was barely quick enough to fall to his knees and catch her.

Holding Neph in his arms, he looked up and noticed the Awakened

warriors of the security team staring at him in shock from afar.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"...What are you doing, fools?! Bring me something to cover her up! Don't you know who this is?!"

He shook his head, hiding the fact that he was as stunned as they were.

"This... this is Lady Changing Star, the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan. She's back..."

Chapter-765: Turmoil

Shock. Confusion. Joy. Reprieve. Peace. Fear…

Sunny sat on a flimsy chair in the waiting area in front of an armored door, shell-shocked by what had happened. What was happening. Failing to envision what was going to happen.

His mind was thoroughly scrambled.

The waiting area was situated on a different level of the hospital complex. By now, the one devastated by the recent events was already put off. The fires were gone. Teams of the Academy staff were sifting through the wreckage, trying to determine the amount of damage done to the structure of the building and various equipment.

Those wounded by the explosion and the members of the security team were being hastily treated. It seemed that no lives were in danger… mostly because Sunny had gotten there in time.

What exactly had transpired?

He had a good idea.

Back when Sunny had Awakened, he had unconsciously activated his Aspect Ability before fully regaining his consciousness. As the result, he had come to his senses standing near the sleeping pod instead of inside of it.

Shadow Step was a teleportation Ability… what if he had gotten a direct damage Ability?

What if he had been a Tyrant, at that?

This was not an uncommon occurrence among the Awakened. Kai had gone through something similar, if Sunny remembered correctly.

The same must have happened to Nephis.

It was just that her new Ability had turned out to be nothing short of devastating. As expected from the daughter of the Immortal Flame clan…

After spending a whole year on the Forgotten Shore and then two more wandering alone through the Dream Realm, she must have been extremely disoriented by the return to the waking world. Using her Aspect caused her to be in the throes of terrible pain, as well. Her Flaw was very cruel, after all.

Perhaps Neph could have regained her composure, but sadly, the automated battle systems of the hospital complex were not sophisticated enough to differentiate between an unknown Awakened and an active threat. Even the members of the security team had failed to make the distinction.

All they had perceived was that the guarded room where the heir of the Immortal Flame slept had been destroyed, and that a seemingly inhuman apparition stood among the fires.

In any case, the turret had unleashed a hail of bullets on Nephis, causing her muddled mind to switch into combat mode. After that, all she saw was a threat.

In combat, you had to kill the enemy and prevent the enemy from killing you.

Who knew how much damage she would have done if Sunny had not appeared on time?

'Lucky…'

But… how was she so powerful? Fourteen powerful Awakened had failed to even slow her down. Not even the cage he had created from shadows could withstand the heat of her flames.

Sunny scowled, then grimaced.

Cassie was sitting nearby, gripping his hand so hard that even Bone Weave was struggling with the pressure. Both of them were waiting

for the doctors examining unconscious Nephis to deliver some news.

He patted the blind girl on the shoulder, then said awkwardly:

"Cas… my hand."

She turned to him with a confused expression, then flinched and let go.

"...Sorry."

They weren't alone in the waiting area. In fact, a small crowd of people was there with them — doctors, faculty members, a few disheveled government agents, Academy administrators… everyone was anticipating the news with baited breaths. Their faces were pale, shocked, and excited.

Morgan of Valor was there, too, leaning against the wall and typing something in her communicator, her expression calm and nonchalant. She seemed to have understood that their negotiations would have to be postponed.

What was the point of negotiating with Sunny and Cassie when everything had just changed? If Valor wanted to recruit the members of Changing Star's cohort and the Fire Keepers, they were going to have to speak with Changing Star herself… most likely.

Or they would continue their attempts to assassinate her. Provided that Valor had been the great clan responsible for sending Caster, of course.

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

'...Right. There's also that.'

The situation had already been incredibly murky and complicated, and with Neph's return, everything was turned upside down and made even more convoluted.

Chaos… it was pure chaos.

Everything was changing.

His own situation had also just turned much more dire, for obvious reasons.

...So why was he struggling to keep a sincere smile from appearing on his face?

Sunny had reasons to be shocked, and reasons to be tense. And he was. But most of all… he was happy.

Incredibly happy.

A sense of profound relief, contentment, and joy threatened to drown his ability to think clearly. He felt as though… as though something precious, something vital that he had lost was suddenly returned to him. Something that he had been missing.

And now that it was back, Sunny felt complete.

'What the hell is this nonsense? Since when am I that sentimental?'

Although he tried to cover his raw emotions with a veneer of cynicism, in truth, Sunny could pinpoint the exact moment when he had changed.

It was when he stepped into the circle of runes inside the Crimson Spire and escaped the Forgotten Shore, leaving Changing Star behind, to be devoured by darkness.

After that, nothing had been the same.

He gritted his teeth.

'Doesn't matter! Take a hold of yourself!"

Sunny had the right to be happy that Nephis had returned alive to them. She was his friend after all… much more than that, even. But that did not mean that he could allow himself to relax.

Just like her name suggested, Changing Star's return was bound to cause a massive shift. There were many dormant dangers that were going to awake now… more than that, there was a chance that she would become a danger to Sunny herself.

He had spent years both hoping for and dreading her return.

'First things first…'

He had to know how Nephis had managed to come back. There were no other Gateways in the Forgotten Shore… had she found one in the Hollow Mountains, or had she gone north, east, or west in search of a less deadly region of the Dream Realm?

Not that there would be… no one had ever returned from those parts, either, after all.

Now that Nephis had lost consciousness, she was bound to be sent back to the Dream Realm. Depending on how dangerous the area surrounding her anchor was, she might not be able to return soon.

Or at all… although Sunny doubted that the probability of that outcome was very high.

The runes shown by the Spell also named an Awakened's anchor. Since he could see both his own status and Neph's, all he had to do to find out was summon them.

Not wasting any more time, Sunny called upon the shimmering runes and concentrated on a certain string of them. A moment later, Neph's status appeared in the air in front of him.

Sunny started reading, but then froze.

His eyes widened.

'How… how is this possible?'

But there was no mistake...

The runes read:

Name: Nephis.

True Name: Changing Star.

Rank: …Ascended.

Chapter-766: Making History

As it turned out, Nephis had not found a Gateway to escape the Dream Realm and Awaken.

Instead, after two long years of solitude and relentless battles for survival, she had found a Seed of Nightmare and conquered the Second Trial of the Spell as a Sleeper.

She had done it alone.

At least that was the only way Sunny could explain the runes he was staring at.

Ascended.

'That is impossible.'

Surviving the Second Nightmare was already not easy for a cohort of prepared Awakened. More people perished while trying than returned victorious. How could a lone Sleeper accomplish the same?

No one had done it before.

However… no Sleeper had been a Tyrant before.

No Sleeper had escaped alive from a battle with a Corrupted horror of the depths before.

No Sleeper had slain a Fallen Terror before.

Nephis had long established her penchant for accomplishing the impossible. Why was Sunny so surprised that she had done it again?

No, he wasn't surprised. He was… dismayed.

A deep, unsettling emotion nestled in his chest, making his face grow

dark and his eyes grow dim. The shadows around him seemed to become deeper.

'...Doesn't matter. That doesn't change anything. The important part is that she is back. Who cares how she returned?'

But it did matter. To him, it was of paramount importance. His obsession with becoming more powerful than Nephis was not born out of simple vanity or empty pride. Someone else might have been tempted to chase power just for the sweetness of it, but to Sunny, being anything else than the strongest was an existential threat.

As he sat in stunned silence, the sound of hurried footsteps resounded near him. Looking up, Sunny saw Effie pushing her way through the crowd. She was not shy about using her prodigious strength, so people did not really have any choice except to let her pass. Even Instructor Rock, who had appeared ten minutes earlier, had to politely make way.

…The big man had been the person to send Nephis into the Dream Realm. It was no wonder that he dropped everything to come and wait with the rest of them. Sunny felt a bit touched.

The huntress finally reached them and froze for a moment, then asked hoarsely:

"Sunny, Cassie! Is it true? Princess is back?"

Sunny looked at her for a bit, then simply nodded.

"Yes. I… I passed her to the healers with my own two hands."

Effie did not move for several seconds. Then, a wide grin split her face. It looked as if she was on the verge of starting to howl again.

"Hell yes! I never had a doubt! No Nightmare Creature exists that can keep that pampered psycho down!"

Sunny couldn't help but smile a little, infected by her jubilation.

Before too long, Kai arrived, as well. Usually, his appearance would have caused a stir, but right now, no one paid the former idol any

attention.

When he received the confirmation, an expression of profound relief appeared on the young man's beautiful face. Kai swayed a little, and then leaned on the wall to keep himself upright.

"Gods… thank the gods…"

Sunny had not realized it, but his friend must have been blaming himself for leaving Nephis behind all that time. He was truly too decent of a person for this vile world, and infected by a misguided sense of nobility to boot. Knowing that he had escaped the hell of the Forgotten Shore because of someone else's sacrifice must have pressed down upon him a lot.

The four of them huddled together and waited. Sunny silently observed the faces of his friends, seeing sincere happiness and relief written all over them. Some… Kai especially… looked on the verge of getting emotional.

Unlike him, they had no reason to feel a strange ambivalence about Changing Star's return.

And looking at them, Sunny decided to ignore the darker part of his mind for a bit, too.

Whatever happened, he would have to deal with it then. If he had to die to avoid becoming a slave, he would. If he had to kill in order to remain free… that was not out of the question, as well.

But for now, he chose to just share this rare moment of joy with his friends.

The founder of their cohort was back, after all.

Soon, the armored doors finally opened, and one of the Awakened healers in the employ of the Academy appeared from them.

Everyone gathered in the waiting area held their breaths. Even Morgan of Valor looked up from her communicator, strange sparks igniting in her vermillion eyes.

One of the government agents couldn't contain herself and asked:

"How… how is she? Lady Changing Star is really back?"

The healer lingered for a moment, and then nodded.

"She is. Her physical condition is fine… better than fine, even. Perfect. As for her mental condition, we will know when she wakes up. Lady Nephis is currently sleeping."

Someone from the crowd immediately spoke:

"Sleeping? Do you mean that she is back in the Dream Realm?!"

The healer hesitated, then slowly shook her head.

"No. Lady Nephis seems to have… Ascended. So, she is simply asleep."

For a moment, the crowd seemed to have lost the ability to speak.

And then, all hell broke loose.

Despite the government's attempts to stall for time and control the narrative, just in a few minutes, the incredible news of Changing Star's return spread across the network.

Not long after that, another explosive rumor appeared, claiming that she was now a Master.

Just like that, all of humanity learned that Nephis of the Immortal Flame clan, the descendant of the two legendary pioneers and the famed hero of the Forgotten Shore, had become the first human in history to conquer the Second Nightmare as a Sleeper, thus jumping Ranks, and returned to the waking world unscathed.

Her already prolific fame and exalted status instantly soared as high as the sun.

While Nephis slept, her arrival was already creating titanic waves in the mindset of millions of people.

In front of the Awakened Academy, a hundred thousand candles continued to burn despite the falling snow.

...And cast by their flames, a hundred thousand shadows danced on the ground.

Chapter-767: Measure of Strength

The news of Changing Star's return spread across the world like wildfire. The network practically exploded with an endless amount of discussions. Everyone wanted to share their excitement and celebrate the homecoming of the young hero who, without a doubt, was going to become one of the most powerful champions of humanity soon.

While exaggerated, the reaction of both mundane humans and Awakened alike was easy to understand. In this dark and fragile world that balanced on the verge of destruction, everyone longed for something to illuminate their lives and chase their fears away. Everyone desperately searched for hope.

Thinking about it, Sunny couldn't help but remember the description of Neph's Aspect. Light Bringer…

[You are a creature of light that was banished and doomed to exist in the darkness. You bring radiance and warmth to wherever you go, but with it comes indescribable longing.]

Was hope the longing it talked about? Longing was just another word for desire, after all…

In any case, the government had long used Nephis to satiate that desire. They had constructed an uplifting narrative around the events of the Forgotten Shore and made her the linchpin of the story.

No matter how much Sunny hated the abhorrent movie adaptation that had been rushed through production soon after their Awakening, he had to admit that it was a sign of how deeply the survivors of the Dreamer Army and their leader had affected the public.

To be fair, the government had not needed to work too hard to turn

Changing Star into an iconic figure. Her achievements had truly been singular and remarkable. Her perceived martyrdom had truly been compelling.

What was more, Nephis had inherited an already established and powerful legend simply on account of her birthright. Her grandfather was the first human to conquer the Second Nightmare and become a Master. Her father was the first to conquer the Third and become a Saint. Both of them were great warriors, pioneers, and revered heroes of humanity.

…And now, she had joined their ranks by becoming the first human to Ascend directly from being a Sleeper.

Considering all that, he was not surprised to see how intensely people reacted to the news. Already, there were a lot of discussions on the network predicting that Changing Star would inevitably become the first to conquer the Fourth Nightmare and push humanity one step closer to salvation, as her parents and grandfather had done.

If only they knew…

If only they knew that Sovereigns had already given up on their world, and that very soon, hundreds of millions of people would probably die for it.

And that the hero they were praising had much grander ambitions.

Conquer the Fourth Nightmare? No, that was too trivial for Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan. She was going to conquer all Nightmares. She was going to destroy the Spell itself…

Or at least try to, even if the waking world had to burn as the consequence.

While the government agents ran around with panicked expressions and most of the waiting crowd dissipated, Sunny found himself leaving the group and walking away to find something to eat. Morgan of Valor had left some time ago, so he did not feel too threatened.

'Oh, right… the true negotiations ended up never happening. I

wonder what it means for my future…'

Eventually, he settled in the hospital's cafeteria and forced himself to swallow some food. A few years ago, he would have been ecstatic to be able to feast on high-quality food like that. But now, he did not even feel the taste of various dishes. They might as well have been mimic meat or synthpaste.

Sunny sat quietly, consumed by thoughts, when Effie suddenly appeared nearby and landed on a chair near him. There was a mountain of food on her own tray. The huntress looked at him with a smile:

"Great minds think alike, huh?"

She took a bite out of a small cake, then swallowed it entirely and said with satisfaction:

"The healers want us four to come help them when Nephis wakes up. You know, in case she becomes... agitated again."

Sunny silently nodded.

Effie sighed.

"I can't believe that she just went and Ascended… well, I can actually. It is still amazing, though! Neph must have one hell of a crazy story to tell. It might even be more unbelievable than our own."

He shrugged, then put a spoonful of something mildly spicy in his mouth.

The huntress studied him for a while, then suddenly said:

"You know… for someone who was just reunited with their first and best friend, you don't look too happy, doofus."

Sunny glanced at her.

"Who said that we are friends?"

Effie scoffed.

"Don't lie to me, Sunny. I know how you feel about Nephis, and how much of it you feel. What's up with you?"

He grimaced.

"Lie? How can I lie?"

Sunny lowered his eyes, hesitated for a while, and then said quietly:

"Stronger… I wanted to be stronger than her. I really, really tried. And to be honest, I am very annoyed that all of it was for nothing."

The huntress looked at him with a strange expression.

"Is that why you were in such a hurry to challenge the Second Nightmare?"

He leaned back and turned away.

"...Yeah. That was a big part of it."

Effie lingered for a bit, then slowly shook her head.

"Listen, Sunny. I am really sorry to say this… but you will never be stronger than Nephis."

He looked at her sharply, sparks of anger igniting in his eyes:

"Oh yeah? Why is that?"

She sighed.

"It's very simple, really. Both of you are exceptional, talented, and have great will. Both of you are incredibly strong. But, Sunny… it doesn't matter how fast you gain a new Rank, how many Nightmare Creatures you kill, how many soul fragments you absorb. She will always be ahead."

She looked him in the eyes and said soberly:

"It's because she has something that you lack. Nephis, she has... conviction, Sunny. And you don't. As long as that doesn't change, you will always be behind."

As he stared at her with resentment, Effie suddenly grinned and shrugged.

"But hey… who cares? I have even less conviction than you, and I'm doing great. Who needs it, anyway… I would much rather have a full belly than something like that!"

With that, she laughed and returned to her food, not paying the conversation any more attention.

Sunny, however, remained still for some time.

A somber expression appeared on his face.

After a while, he sighed and silently resumed eating his meal.

'Conviction… conviction... who needs it, indeed…'

Chapter-768: Dark Shore

Eventually, the four of them were invited into the room where Nephis slept… this time on a hospital bed instead of inside of a closed coffin of a sleeping pod. The administrators of the Academy wanted to avoid any more damage, so asking the members of Changing Star's cohort for help was a logical step.

Seeing familiar faces first after waking up would probably calm her down. And if not… having four Masters at hand would be enough to deal with any unforeseen complications.

Most likely...

Sunny stood in the corner, looking at Nephis with a somber expression. Her pale face, her silver hair. For the past two years, he had often seen her through the transparent lid of the sleeping pod, bathed in its ghostly light. Now that she was out and returned to the real world, Changing Star seemed much more… material. And strangely vulnerable.

She was truly back.

He sighed.

Cassie was sitting on a chair beside the bed, while Effie and Kai were resting on a sofa. None of them knew when Neph was going to wake up, and they had already spent a couple hours waiting. Without having to discuss it, all four decided to stay quiet. So… by now, they were pretty bored.

Sunny, on the other hand, was filled with more and more tension.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

'This anticipation is killing me. It's pure torture.'

He did not think that Nephis would abuse her power over him. But it was better to prepare for the worst. For that reason, Sunny was mentally going over all the clever ways he had thought of to undermine her absolute authority as his master. There were always ways... owning an unwilling slave was not an easy endeavor. Especially one as powerful and resourceful as him.

That had been one of the reasons why he had chosen to kill the Mirror Beast instead of subjugating it, all that time ago.

Still, Sunny could not help but feel a hint of fear.

...After a while, he shook his head and moved slightly. Then, without being noticed by anyone, Sunny silently merged with shadows.

Hidden in their dark embrace, he hesitated for a few moments, and then called upon Nightmare. A vast shadow appeared near him, all around him… this was the dark destrier in his true, shapeless form.

Sunny allowed himself to be enveloped by the larger shadow, and then gave it a silent command. What happened next… was hard to describe.

He had only done this a few times in the past, and each time was as strange. It was a bit like traveling to the Dream Realm, but also different.

Tired of waiting, Sunny had decided to travel to Neph's dreams. There was no sense in prolonging his anxious anticipation, anyway. He had to see if Changing Star was still sane. He had to know that she was still... herself.

Soon, Sunny found himself on a dark shore.

Beneath him was a vertical slope, with furious waves crashing against the cliffs far below. Some distance away, a tall and beautiful lighthouse stood, illuminating the absolute darkness with its radiant flame.

Sunny studied it for a while, and then nudged Nightmare to walk along the edge of the cliff. Sitting in the saddle, he rode the black steed and tried not to look around too much.

Dreams were a strange place. They did not adhere to the logic of the real world and were always flowing, always changing. The more powerful a dreamer was, the more solid they sometimes appeared.

They were also dangerous for Dreamwalkers such as Nightmare and Sunny. The threats contained within them might not have been real, but by invading this subliminal space, the uninvited guests had to treat them as such.

This was why Nightmare often returned wounded from his travels. If an Ascended dreamt of a powerful abomination, the dark destrier had to battle the abomination as if it was real. However, not only dreadful fiends posed a threat. His opponents were empowered by the dream itself, so their strength depended on the strength of the dreamer. Their actual shape did not matter that much.

Nephis… was very strong. So her nightmares were bound to be terrible, as well.

Soon, the landscape around them changed. The dark shore and the lighthouse disappeared, and instead, the streets of a ruined city appeared from nowhere. With a bit of apprehension, Sunny recognized the familiar shapes of the stone buildings of the Dark City. However, they were simultaneously the alloy towers of the Siege Capital. Their facades were broken, with smoke and fire escaping from the cracks.

A wide road was littered with burning debris, and a luxurious PTV lay overturned some distance away, its armored frame bent and riddled with holes. Blood was spilling on the melting asphalt from the shattered windows.

Sunny slowly approached the PTV and then jumped off Nightmare's back. After hesitating for a moment, he bent down and looked inside the cabin.

There were several corpses inside, all wearing mundane clothes. Most disturbingly, these people lacked faces, and instead looked like smooth-faced mannequins. Their flesh, however, was quite real… and terribly mangled.

With a frown, he looked away and studied the surroundings. It did not take him long to notice a trail of blood leading away from the burning PTV.

Leaving Nightmare behind, Sunny followed the trail.

He crossed the street and entered the foyer of a business tower through a large hole in its wall. Looking around, Sunny noticed that the foyer strangely resembled the silent shore of the dark river they had crossed once, a long time ago, while searching for the remains of the First Lord.

White fog swirled above the water, full of silent whispers.

There was only one thing that did not seem to fit — a large reception desk stood not too far away from him, drowning in shadows.

Sunny slowly walked to it and then moved around.

Behind the desk, leaning on it with her back, a young woman with silver hair sat on the ground. Her face was pale and tired, and her striking grey eyes were devoid of any light. She was wearing mundane clothes, which were marred with blood.

Sunny sighed, and then said:

"Hey, Neph."

The young woman slowly looked up... and then smiled.

"Hey, Sunny."

Chapter-769: Maybe

A beautiful smile illuminated Neph's face, making her look much softer and younger than she usually seemed. In all the time they knew each other, Sunny had only seen her smile a few times, and every time he did, a hint of regret brushed against his heart. It was a shame, for such a brilliant smile to appear so seldom…

Maybe in her dreams, Changing Star allowed herself to show it more often.

Looking at the reception desk serving as her cover, he tried to make his voice sound calm and asked:

"What are you doing here?"

Nephis lingered for a moment, and then looked down.

"...Hiding."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"From what?"

Her voice grew quiet as she answered, still looking at the ground:

"Bad people."

He sighed.

It seemed that the memory this nightmare had spawned from belonged to a much younger Nephis. Something similar must have happened to her when she was a kid… and so, although Changing Star looked like her adult self, she was simultaneously a child. That meant that she was not supposed to have any memory of meeting and getting to know Sunny, and yet, she did.

Dreams were strange that way. All kinds of contradictions could exist within them, merging things that could not coexist in reality.

Sunny lowered himself to the ground and sat next to Neph, leaning on the surface of the desk beside her. He remained silent for a while, and then said with a reassuring smile:

"Well… don't be afraid. I'll hide here with you. I am very good at hiding, you know. If bad people come, they will never see us."

Nephis slowly shook her head.

"I don't know…"

Sunny crossed his arms.

"And if they do see us, I'll deal with them. I am very good at dealing with things, as well."

She did not move for a long time, and then suddenly said:

"This is a dream, isn't it?"

He almost flinched, and then tried very hard to suppress a curse. That question was… extremely startling.

Well, what else did he expect? This was Nephis, after all. Even the Awakened Terror of her First Nightmare had failed to contain her within a dream.

Regaining his composure, Sunny simply nodded. Nephis sighed.

"It is too nice to be real. Strange… I haven't dreamt in a long, long time."

Slowly, the space between them started to change. It flowed, transforming into something different. The darkness was dispelled by the radiance of an incandescent sun. The cold waters receded, making way for pristine white sand. Above them, there was now a boundless azure sky. Sunny felt an unbearable heat assault his skin.

A few moments later, they were surrounded by a vast, scorching

desert.

Instead of a modern desk, their backs were against the trunk of a tall tree. Its bark was as white as the pristine sand, and its leaves were scarlet. Tens of thousands of skulls hung from the beautiful branches, fastened to them by glistening threads of black silk.

More disturbingly, two human figures were cruelly nailed to the tree, hanging from it like prisoners. One of them was a man with black hair, dressed in dark clothes. The other was a woman in white, her hair glistening like silver. From where he sat, Sunny could not see their faces.

…Perhaps that was for the best.

He opened his mouth, but then froze, realizing that he did not know what to say.

There was too much. Too much he wanted to tell her, too much he wanted to ask her. There were matters they had to discuss that had to do with their future, the great clans, the Sovereigns. There were matters they had to discuss that had to do with their past, the decisions they had made, the mistakes that had been committed.

There were his emotions, as well. His resentment, his anger, his pain, his joy, his glee.

There were her emotions, as well…

All of this was so immense. Sunny was much older now than when they had first met… even though only three years passed, those years contained lifetimes of bitter lessons he had learned. He had never been good with complicated feelings, and although he did make some progress on that front, Sunny was still far from being adept in these matters.

So what was he supposed to say?

He remained silent for a while. Then, finally, he looked at her and said the only thing that came to his mind.

The most truthful one.

"I missed you."

Nephis smiled, and looked at him as well.

"...I missed you, too."

Sunny let out a heavy sigh, and slumped a little, full of strange relief.

A moment later, however, his face turned dark and ugly.

Gritting his teeth, he glared at her and spat:

"If you really missed me… then why the hell had you left me behind?!"

Neph's smile slowly dimmed. A few moments later, she looked away and sighed.

"Because it was the better choice."

Sunny clenched his fists.

"Who the hell do you think you are?! Who asked for your righteousness?! Do you even know what you took from me?! Who gave you the right to make that choice for me?!"

Changing Star looked down and remained silent for a bit. Then, she said:

"But I did not make it for you. I made it for me."

She studied the white desert for a while, and then sighed.

"If you remained with me… yes, maybe, we would have been stronger together. Maybe we would have grown faster together. Maybe we would have been better... together. Maybe we would have survived. But what were the chances of that?

Unlike me, you can't heal yourself from terrible wounds. Your soul is not infused with the Fire. Maybe, you would have just died."

Nephis looked at him, soft sparks igniting in her grey eyes.

"That was too many maybes, Sunny. I had to have the worst outcome in mind. So I made the decision that did not risk your life. But… make no mistake — it was not for you. It was for me. It was not that I did not want you to die, it was that I wanted to spare myself from having to watch you die.

I had to protect myself, too."

She stared at the white sand, and whispered:

"I buried too many people, Sunny. I deserved the right to be selfish. Even if it did you harm…"

He stared at her with a dark expression, then spat:

"Why do you even care whether I live or die?!"

Nephis looked at him and smiled. The wind moved her silver hair, making it dance.

Then, she shrugged and said in an even tone:

"Because I do."

Chapter-770: Aimless Blade

'Argh! What an infuriating woman!'

Sunny appeared from the shadows and resumed his position in the corner. No one seemed to have noticed his absence, which was for the best.

His short conversation with Nephis had been interrupted by the appearance of a ghastly demon with six arms and charred black holes instead of eyes. Sunny had done his best to restrain the abomination while Nightmare attacked it from the back. In the end, they managed to destroy it without sustaining any wounds.

It had not been an easy battle, though.

After that, Sunny felt too confused to continue the conversation, and instead chose to return to the waking world.

'Because I do… that doesn't even make any sense!'

It seemed that Neph's whole existence was designed to continuously stump him. From their first conversation on the Forgotten Shore until now, he just could not get how her mind worked. Protecting Cassie simply because she wanted to, caring about people simply because she did… the sheer audacity of being so unapologetically strange and irrational made him fume.

Especially so because he suspected that Nephis somehow derived strength from this bizarre attitude. Was that what Effie had meant when she talked about conviction?

Sunny did not really understand what exactly it was that she thought he lacked. Was it will or determination? If so, the huntress was terribly mistaken. He might not have been the most principled of people, but few could boast of having more determination than

Sunny. Otherwise, he would not have survived all the terrible trials that life had thrown his way.

But maybe… maybe conviction was something else. Maybe having will and determination was not enough, unless they were aimed at something precise, and guided by a singular purpose. After all, having a sharp sword was useless unless it was brandished against an enemy.

Was conviction a guiding principle that shaped formless power and determination into a sharp blade? Was it an unbreakable will to achieve a certain purpose?

No… it was not so simple. Sunny was not without a purpose, after all. He had his own goals — to have a good life, to be free, to make sure that those he cared about were safe. Why were these values not worthy of being called a conviction?

If there was one thing he noticed, it was that all of his desires were centered around him. They were all aimed inside. He did not think that there was anything wrong with that… in fact, he considered it a great virtue.

Nephis, on the other hand, disregarded herself to an almost demented degree in pursuit of her goals. All her desires were aimed outside, and incredibly ambitious.

Was that the meaning of conviction, then? Was it not only important to have a purpose, but also for the nature of that purpose to be larger than oneself? For the principles that guided one's determination to be founded in something vast and deep, thus pushing the person to rise higher and strive for more?

All that sounded too high and mighty to Sunny. He was more inclined to value his own simple goals over such lofty ambitions.

However, he couldn't help but feel a bit uncomfortable at the thought that someone with a greater purpose had an inherent advantage over someone who just wanted to be left alone, as he did.

Unfortunately for Sunny, he was fated to compete against exactly

these kinds of people if he wanted to be free to live his life as he seemed fit. Only if he became greater than all of them would they leave him be.

Which was bound to result in a very inconvenient paradox…

'Why am I even thinking about this? Damned Effie and her damned moments of insightfulness… who says she's even right?'

In any case, he had other things to consider.

His visit to Neph's dream had not turned out how he hoped it would. Sunny did accomplish one of his goals and tentatively made sure that two years of lonely and, no doubt, harrowing travels through the Dream Realm had not driven Changing Star insane.

The exact scope of damage done to her mind was yet to become clear, but at least she was not a raving lunatic. In fact… Nephis seemed strangely stable for a person who had gone through something that no one should have ever been forced to endure.

Whether it was the result of her stalwart willpower or something else entirely, he did not know. Regardless, a lot of tension Sunny had felt slowly dissipated.

Not all of it, however.

While he had determined Neph's general mental state, he failed in his two other intentions.

First, Sunny had not been able to find a bit of closure in dismantling her reasons for invoking his True Name. He had expected Changing Star to hide behind a false and misguided veil of having done it for his own good. He had been prepared, and wished to, obliterate her hypocritical pretense of righteousness.

He wanted to express his anger, fury, and resentment. He wanted to cause her to feel at least a small part of the anguish that she had caused him to feel.

But Nephis had subverted his expectations by readily admitting that her actions were nothing but selfish, making all the attacks and

accusations he had prepared moot. That left Sunny confused and unsatisfied. The fight he had wanted to pick never happened, because the other person did not want to fight.

His animosity was not only struggling against his own complicated feelings, but also completely one-sided.

'Infuriating…'

Much more importantly… Sunny had failed to learn the most vital information. He had not gathered the courage to ask the question that was bothering him the most.

What were Changing Star's intentions toward their strange and inescapable bond?

What was she going to do with her power over him?

So many heavy, complicated, and frightening things were tied to that question. Once he asked it, there would be no going back. He could lose so many things that he cherished, and even more that he did not even have the opportunity to experience yet.

Depending on the answer, the nature of their relationship could forever change. There was a possibility that it would cease to exist, even.

Although it might have seemed like he was burying his head in the sand, Sunny simply could not bring himself to have that fateful conversation yet. The stakes were too high. And so, for now, he decided to follow the easiest path and simply let some things remain unsaid.

He wanted to see how the situation would develop, first. There would always be time to act later.

…At least that was what he told himself.

As time passed, the four Masters remained silent. They were watching over the young woman who slept peacefully, her nightmare slain by a transient shadow and his steed.

After a while, Neph's eyelids quivered. And then, slowly, she opened her eyes.

Chapter-771: Honor Guard

After it became apparent that Nephis was not going to go on a destructive rampage, the cohort did not get a lot of time to spend with their friend before the government agents whisked her away.

Cassie barely managed to squeeze her hand, while Effie and Kai could only express their joy with words. Sunny remained silent, still preoccupied with his tumultuous thoughts. The corner he was standing in became even darker than it had been before.

Neph herself seemed a bit disoriented, so their short reunion had turned out to be somewhat muddled.

There were certain procedures involved when a person Awakened, and even more once they Ascended. All kinds of interviews, evaluations, and tests had to take place. All kinds of reports had to be submitted, all types of permissions had to be granted, and all varieties of procedures had to be enacted.

The bureaucratic machine stirred awake to legitimize and integrate a new Master into the larger framework of humanity.

Sunny knew the process well, because he had gone through it himself. It was just that his own experience had been separated into two distinct instances, and made smoother by Master Jet's participation.

Nephis, on the other hand, had to go through both sets of procedures at once, which was more or less unprecedented. She also did not enjoy the patronage of a high-ranking government representative… yet. Perhaps that would not last long.

There were other complications, as well. Her situation was unique and abnormal in more than one sense. Just the fact that she had become a Master without establishing a Gateway anchor in the

Dream Realm alone was enough to make the bureaucracy stutter.

The government agents had their work cut out for them.

…It was not all bad, however. The process, while slightly obnoxious, was there for a reason. It was not only about gathering the necessary information and officially establishing the Ascended's new and elevated status.

It was also designed to help the returned deal with the most damaging effects of suddenly coming back to safety after experiencing untold horrors in the Nightmare, at least to a certain degree.

No matter how strong Changing Star was, no one doubted that her harrowing adventure through the Dream Realm and the Nightmare had left its scars on her mind. The government was well aware of how fragile many powerful Awakened truly were.

It was not only on guard against those who could break, but also experienced in employing all kinds of preventative measures to reduce the possibility of that happening.

Due to how important Nephis was both to the propaganda machine and to the actual defensive efforts of humanity as another Special Strategic Asset, the government threw its best resources into ensuring that the initial steps of her rehabilitation went as smoothly as possible.

Of course, she was free to decide how much exactly she was willing to share. Some basic tests, however, were mandatory, since it was necessary to determine how safe it was to release her into the population.

What it meant was that it would take long hours before the members of the cohort would be able to see Changing Star again.

They weren't the only ones waiting, too.

At some point, Cassie had left and returned to the Dream Realm to inform the Fire Keepers of the incredible new development. Soon enough, dozens of them used the Gateway in the Ivory Tower and

returned to the waking world for the first time in months.

Since their sleeping pods were situated right there in the hospital complex of the Academy, it did not take a long time for all of them to gather in the hallway near where Nephis was undergoing her interviews. Now, around fifty young Awakened crowded it, as if standing guard.

After spending almost half a year in the Dream Realm, the Fire Keepers looked rough around the edges, if not a little feral. They were wearing civilian clothes, but no one would mistake these people for mundane humans, or even ordinary Awakened.

There was a strong sense of silent threat radiating from them. Their expressions were full of glee, but their gazes remained firm and heavy, making anyone who approached feel ill at ease. That was especially true for the members of Cassie's former cohort, which was now led by the stoic healer, Shim. They were all on high alert and ready to pounce on anyone representing a threat.

With the Fire Keepers standing guard, any potential action by the great clans was bound to end in failure, or at least outright disaster. In fact, they seemed so fierce that even the security teams of the Academy became nervous and sent a few cohorts of their own to keep watch on the celebrating group.

It was easy to read the extreme apprehension on the faces of the security officers, though. Awakened or not, they seemed to understand that they stood no chance against the elites of the Forgotten Shore if push came to shove.

Observing all that, Sunny couldn't help but ask himself a question.

…If six months of hiding in the relative safety of the Ivory Tower had such a drastic effect on the Fire Keepers, then what had two years of traversing some of the direst regions of the Dream Realm done to Nephis?

After a while, he quietly approached Cassie and asked quietly:

"How is it going?"

She turned her head slightly and frowned.

"What do you mean?"

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Come on. There's no chance that you did not use your Ability on one of the government agents handling Neph's processing. So what is happening?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then sighed.

"She seems to be in shock, somewhat. But mostly, she's… fine. Actually, it's a bit disturbing how fine she is."

He frowned.

"Well… it's Nephis. You know how she is."

Cassie slowly shook her head.

"She is human too, Sunny. It's just easy to forget that fact sometimes because of… well, because it's her."

Sunny fell silent, not knowing what to say. After a few moments, the blind girl suddenly spoke again:

"She seems reluctant to speak about most of what happened to her, but… at least, she agreed to receive psychological counseling. That's a good start."

He blinked a couple of times.

Nephis agreed… to what?

The idea of Changing Star being willing to undergo something like counseling did not fit into his head. It was just too bizarre to imagine.

Sunny frowned.

'Maybe… maybe she did change, a little.'

Finally, after long hours of waiting, the government agents seemed to

finish the bulk of their tests.

The doors opened, and the familiar figure stepped out of them. Just like on the first day Sunny had met her, Nephis was wearing a simple government-issued tracksuit. Her silver hair, however, was now long and lustrous, framing her face and making her look strangely feminine.

Her beauty was stunning.

When Changing Star appeared, it seemed as though the whole hallway became a little brighter.

Looking at the members of her cohort and the Fire Keepers gathered around them, Nephis hesitated for a moment, and then smiled awkwardly.

"Hello, everyone. I… I am glad to meet you all again. I did not think that I would."

...Before she was even done speaking, Cassie stepped forward and enveloped her in a tight hug.

Chapter-772: Journey to the East

Some time later, all five members of the cohort finally found themselves alone. The Fire Keepers were still around, but decided to give their leaders some much-needed privacy. As the result, only Nephis, Sunny, Cassie, Effie, and Kai remained in a spacious hospital room.

Changing Star was standing by the window, looking at the peaceful landscape of the Academy ground with a strange, still expression. She seemed to have regressed to her old self, which had trouble communicating emotions and interacting with people. For that reason, it was hard to understand what she was thinking about.

The others gave her some space. Despite the fact that Nephis was standing right in front of them, it was not too easy to come to terms with the fact that she was actually, truly back. They were still struggling to get used to this new reality, but a warm wave of relief and happiness was slowly rising in their hearts.

Sunny was no different. It was just that his joy was somewhat overshadowed by a contradicting feeling of unease and apprehension.

Finally, Nephis sighed and turned around. A pale smile appeared on her face.

"You… you are all Masters. I did not expect that."

Effie, who was sitting comfortably on a cushy chair with her legs stretched, laughed.

"You're one to talk!"

Neph studied the four of them, then let out a slow sigh.

"I did not even know if all of you managed to survive. I… I hoped, of course. So I am very glad to see that you did. And helped each other."

A distant look appeared on Kai's face. He remained silent for a bit, remembering the events of the Second Nightmare, and then said gently:

"Yes, we had each other to lean on in our darkest moments. But you… you were completely alone, all that time. Lady Nephis, please forgive me… but how did you survive?"

Nephis looked away with a smile.

"...I wasn't really completely alone, either."

Then, she walked over to the hospital bed and sat down, facing them.

"There is not much to tell, really. The Crimson Terror was in its most vulnerable state when I reached the top of the Spire. Unrestrained by the dark sea, she had absorbed countless souls and was in the middle of an arduous evolution. With the help of the Dawn Shard, I was able to strike her down."

That simple explanation did not really do justice to the incredible accomplishment of slaying a Fallen Terror, but Neph seemed reluctant to dwell too much on that part of her story. She also decided to skip the part about their confrontation with Sunny entirely. Instead, she looked at the window and continued:

"After she died, however, the Spire became unstable. The Gateway collapsed, and the tower itself soon followed. I barely escaped the debris. The artificial sun of the Forgotten Shore was extinguished, as well, submerging it into absolute darkness. The labyrinth itself perished, too, the crimson coral turning grey and slowly crumbling to dust.

With no sea, no sun, and most Nightmare Creatures eradicated by the culling, it became a lightless and desolate place."

She sighed.

"I traveled back to the Dark City and spent some time there, hunting

down the remaining abominations and preparing for a long journey. With the help of the Dawn Shard and the Nameless Sun, many powerful Nightmare Creatures fell to my blade. For a while, I entertained the idea of trying to cross the Hollow Mountains, but eventually had to abandon it. Nothing but death awaited me there.

So, I had to choose another direction."

Nephis paused for a moment, then continued in a steady tone:

"I knew that the deadly mountain chain stretched further than Ravenheart in the west. There was no passage there. Going north meant moving further away from human Citadels. So, it only left east. There was a chance that the Hollow Mountains were not as tall and unassailable there, or even that there was an end to them somewhere in those unexplored regions.

It was only a chance, but it was all that I had. So, I left the Dark City and retraced the steps of the journey that Sunny, Cassie, and I had made before… avoiding the Ashen Barrow, of course."

Sunny moved slightly, remembering their encounter with Soul Devourer. He had not forgotten his promise to come back and destroy the damned tree… granted, he had no plans of returning to the Forgotten Shore, currently. Even his pettiness had a limit.

Maybe he would still be able to exact his revenge on the vile fiend one day, though.

Changing Star, meanwhile, continued her tale:

"Eventually, I reached the edges of the Forgotten Shore and crossed into a vast and terrible desert. Seeing the sun and the stars once again… it was like a blessing. But that blessing came with its own curse. The desert had once been the site of a great battle, I think… or maybe that land had been turned into a lifeless desert by the battle, instead.

In any case, echoes of the clash between powers well beyond our comprehension still linger there, making it a dire and deadly place."

As Sunny remembered the white desert from her dream, Nephis

paused, and then continued in a somber tone:

"But at that point, it was too late for me to turn back. Following along the Hollow Mountains, I ventured into the desert and made my way further east. Unfortunately, no matter how many days I traveled, the misty peaks showed no signs of abating. Eventually, I knew that I could not continue. I think… I think that the white desert is impossible to cross.

The parts of it I only barely survived were on the periphery of the ancient battlefield. The deeper I went, the more terrifying it became. The inner reaches of that region, where the true clashes had happened, had to be a Death Zone of its own. Worse still, even if one manages to resist the many horrors dwelling there, the desert itself will eventually kill them.

There is… there is simply no way to survive it."

She looked at them, white sparks igniting in her eyes.

"With no way forward and no way back, I... I grew desperate enough to finally venture into the Hollow Mountains. However, I had no hope of traversing them and reaching the human territories on the other side. I had also failed to find any sign of a Gateway in my long travels. So, I did the only thing I could think of… I tried to find a Seed of Nightmare.

Eventually and with some help, I encountered one near the boundary of the dark realm that hides within the mountains… and challenged it."

A pale smile appeared on Neph's face.

"And here I am. Safe and sound."

She grew silent for a few moments, and then added quietly:

"Well… not quite. But I am still alive, at least."

Chapter-773: Catching Up

It took some time for the members of the cohort to digest Neph's story. Sunny, especially, felt like she did not tell them even a fraction of what had happened to her.

But then again, was it even possible to describe two years of neverending struggle for survival with just a few words? Not even considering the things that Changing Star might have wished to keep to herself — and he was sure that there were plenty — she would have had trouble describing even the things that she wanted to share.

It was going to take time.

As for the actual secrets… while he was dismayed and uneasy, Sunny himself was known to keep a lot of things close to his chest. More than that, they all had to be cautious about what they said. The room provided to Nephis by the Academy might have been safe, but that did not mean that it was not monitored.

That was the reason why both Effie and Kai remained mostly silent despite the fact that they clearly had a lot of questions. Unlike Sunny, they did not possess a good understanding of Changing Star's Aspect and current Class. All they knew was that she possessed a Divine Aspect, just like Sunny and Mordret did.

Eventually, Cassie broke the silence:

"It is fine. Now that you are back, everything is going to be fine."

She paused, and then added somberly:

"However… our current situation is very delicate."

Nephis looked at her and frowned, the white sparks in her eyes becoming a little brighter.

"Were there any… complications after you returned from the Forgotten Shore?"

She was alluding to Caster, the great clans, and the Sovereigns that wished her dead, of course.

Sunny finally spoke:

"Not immediately. But we ran into some trouble not long before venturing into the Second Nightmare."

Changing Star's frown deepened.

"Can you tell me what exactly happened?"

He shrugged.

"I can. But we'll get you up to speed later, in a more private setting. For now, let's just say that there was supposed to be a negotiation with the representatives of the great clan Valor today. Which fell through… for obvious reasons."

Sunny paused for a moment, and then added:

"Other than that, the important things to know are… let me think, actually. Uh… I am a renowned academic and an instructor at the Academy now. Cassie leads the Fire Keepers. Oh, Fire Keepers are the Forgotten Shore survivors whom you saw outside. They are basically your groupies. Right, you are famous now!

Very, very famous. There is even a movie about you, with a very well-received romantic subplot. What else… we have a flying ship and an exclusive Citadel in the Dream Realm, Effie moved in with me, Night&Gale disbanded…"

Neph's face slowly turned paler and paler. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore and raised a hand.

"What? Wait… what? Kai, is this true? Night&Gale disbanded?"

Sunny glanced at her darkly.

"Really? That is your first question?"

Kai, meanwhile, looked down in embarrassment.

"That… yes, I am sorry to say this, but Gale and I decided to go our separate ways. It is for the best. My status as a Master would have just dragged him down, especially because my Aspect evolved after I killed that dragon…"

Nephis blinked.

"A… a dragon?"

Sunny grinned.

"Oh yes, Kai killed a Transcendent dragon. Effie and I killed a couple of Saints, too. I even killed the same one twice. First time before I was beheaded, the second time after…"

Changing Star slowly raised her second hand and grabbed her head.

"I—I think I need a moment. Wait, can you start from the beginning?"

A strange expression suddenly appeared on her face.

"And did you say something about a movie? With a… romantic subplot? What?!"

***

Sunny had a bit of fun filling Nephis in on what had been going on with the four of them, and the waking world, during her absence. There was a lot of ground to cover, but he chose only the juiciest moments.

Like falling into a bottomless abyss for a month straight on top of a dead demon, being burned by divine flames, and discovering an ancient tower left behind by a mysterious deity.

Or finding out that Effie was confined to a wheelchair in the waking world, only to see her leave it behind after conquering the Second Nightmare.

Or slaying a Corrupted Monster to get their hands on a shipwrecked flying vessel and repair it.

Or watching two Saints obliterate an entire island as they fought to the death.

The list went on and on…

After a while, Neph weakly waved her hand.

"I… I think I need a break. Can you guys give me a few minutes?"

By then, it was already late into the night. It was dark outside the window, with only pale moonlight and powerful beams of defense turrets illuminating the black sky.

Sunny grew silent, then shrugged.

"Sure. You need some rest, anyway. We can continue in the morning. The government should be ready to release you by then, too. Have you thought about where you want to go? Staying here in the Academy is an option too, of course."

He thought for a few moments, and then added awkwardly:

"Uh… I feel stupid asking this, but do you have a place to stay? Do you have money? Are there people we need to contact? What is your clan's situation, exactly?"

Nephis absentmindedly touched her neck, then answered in a neutral tone:

"There is… a manor. That is pretty much the only property the clan has left. Everything else was liquidated and sold a long time ago. I sealed it before leaving for the First Nightmare, so it should have remained empty for the last three years. It's hard to say what state it's in."

She lingered for a moment, and then added:

"I should have a bit of money left. And there are no people. Most of our retainers fled over the years, and the rest left after my

grandmother passed away. That… that was not too long before my Nightmare, too. I'll have to think about what to do now."

Sunny looked at her, and then frowned a little.

"What about safety? Aren't you concerned about, you know… your previous issues?"

Nephis remained silent for a long time, then shook her head.

"I don't think anyone will try to kill me anytime soon."

He glanced at her with dark curiosity.

"Really? Why? Some people weren't shy about it before."

Changing Star looked at him, and then said evenly:

"...Because now, I am not easily killed."

Chapter-774: Fundamental Changes

She wasn't wrong.

As the members of the cohort left the room to give Nephis time to rest, Sunny was deep in thought. Changing Star was an Ascended Tyrant now. Killing her was much harder than assassinating a mundane child that was protected only by the dwindling forces of a fallen clan, especially due to the nature of her powers.

In fact, short of sending a Saint to do the job, nothing the great clans could throw at her would work. Saints were a precious resource, however, and more than that, rare enough to make their movements almost impossible to hide. Unless the Sovereigns were ready to abandon all pretenses of civility, there was no easy way to get rid of Nephis anymore. She had ensured that by becoming a Master directly.

The situation had fundamentally changed.

And that was not even accounting for the tremendous public outcry that would result from something like that ever coming to light. Whether the great clans wanted to admit it or not, they were still tied to the rest of humanity. All Awakened came from mundane humans, after all. Losing the support of the masses would threaten the very base of the power that the Sovereigns enjoyed.

Come to think of it, getting rid of Sunny was almost equally as hard. He doubted that any Master, with the exception of maybe direct children of Anvil of Valor, would be able to pose a serious threat to him. There were two more great clans to consider, of course. But he doubted that any scion of Song or Night was more dangerous than the Princess of War, Morgan.

So… what did it all mean?

It meant that their position in the negotiations had vastly improved. They could exert much more pressure on Valor, and achieve much better results.

…That was if Nephis did not do anything extreme, of course. Which she was more than capable of doing, considering her searing hatred for the three Sovereigns.

After hesitating for a bit, Sunny walked over to Cassie, leaned on the wall near her, and asked quietly:

"What do you think she will do?"

The blind girl understood his meaning without having to specify what exactly the question was about. Perhaps she was considering the same issue.

Cassie lingered for a moment, then said quietly:

"Negotiate."

Sunny barely suppressed a chuckle.

"Negotiate? Are we talking about the same Nephis? Do you know how much she despises the great clans? What her insane ambitions are? Somehow, I feel that two years of barely clinging to life in the Dream Realm did nothing to blunt her resolve. If anything, I think that it has only been sharpened."

The blind girl remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"I think so too. However, there is little choice. She is still too weak to face the… the enemy directly. It is because her resolve remains the same that she will have to make herself flexible."

A dark expression appeared on Sunny's face.

"When have you ever known Neph to be flexible?"

Cassie turned her head slightly, facing him. Her expression was

somber and serious.

"Neph can be whatever she needs to be to achieve her goals. Same as you. Don't forget that."

What was that supposed to mean?

Sunny grimaced, then looked away. After a while, he asked in a grim tone:

"So where does it leave us?"

Whether he wanted it or not, he was tied to Nephis. That bond was strong, but not unbreakable… if he really wanted to, he could attempt to destroy it. He could kill her. He could run away. He could try to find a more obscure method.

However, Sunny did not know if he was willing to pay the price of destroying their bond. At least not until he saw a sign that Changing Star was willing to wield her power as his master, not just possess it.

Unless she did, he was only a slave in name. Although reluctantly, Sunny was barely able to tolerate such an arrangement. Having a master that was unwilling to exercise her power was even beneficial to him, since it protected him from others who would want to abuse that power… like Mordret, for example.

If his position as Neph's shadow ever gained substance due to her actions, however… then, one of them was going to have to die. That Sunny was certain of. He wouldn't hold anything back to make sure that he was the one left standing in the end, as well.

But that moment had not yet come. And hopefully, it was never going to.

So, for now, his future was doomed to be influenced by the decisions Nephis made.

The blind girl sighed.

"Where does it leave us? Even I don't know. Everything is changing, Sunny, and all we can do is try to change as fast as it does. That is

the only way to keep ourselves and those we care about safe from the world."

Sunny looked at Cassie, trying to understand the implications hidden in her words.

Then, he said in a grim tone:

"...Who's going to keep the world safe from us?"

***

The next day, a small convoy of PTVs left the Academy grounds. Most of them carried the Fire Keepers, while the members of the cohort were seated together in one of the vehicles.

For obvious reasons, neither Sunny nor Effie knew how to drive. Cassie was unable to steer a PTV, as well. So, in a strange turn of events, Ascended Nightingale — a famous idol and global celebrity — ended up playing the role of the chauffeur.

Kai and Sunny sat in the front, while the three young women remained at the back of the vehicle. As the convoy moved through the streets of the city, they briefly explained the more sensitive details of the cohort's current situation to Nephis.

The column of PTVs was headed toward a remote district where Immortal Flame's sealed manor was situated. It was decided that the Fire Keepers would establish their waking world headquarters there.

…At some point, however, a single vehicle quietly separated from the convoy and dove into a high-speed tunnel, unnoticed.

Soon, it appeared in a peaceful neighborhood full of beautiful terraces and parked near a grey two-story house with a cozy synthwood porch. Sunny left the PTV first and then stood silently for a few moments, waiting for others to do the same.

Then, he looked at Nephis, cleared his throat, and said awkwardly:

"Welcome to my humble abode, I guess. It, uh… has designer lamps and a state-of-the-art refrigerator. Among other things…"

Chapter-775: Cafe Sunless

After the five of them walked inside, Nephis remained silent for a few moments as she looked around. Although her face was still and stoic as ever, Sunny could have sworn that he noticed a hint of curiosity reflected in her cold grey eyes.

After a while, she asked:

"This is your home?"

Due to her sheltered upbringing, Changing Star had probably never been in a normal residence. Strangely, she was someone who had only experienced living in upscale manors and squalid Dream Realm slums, with nothing in between.

Still, Sunny was not discouraged. He grinned and nodded proudly.

"Yes. Bought it fair and square, with the contribution points from my first research paper. I own this place!"

Nephis hesitated.

"What happened to the walls?"

His smile dimmed a little.

"...Effie happened."

Of course, he had long cleaned the mess that the huntress created after Ascending. However, Sunny had been too preoccupied with other matters to enact proper repairs. As the result, the guest bedroom only had a flimsy curtain covering its irregular-shaped entrance, but no door.

'Maybe I should get to it…'

Sunny cleared his throat, then gestured at the living room section of the main space.

"Make yourself comfortable. I'll make us something to eat."

As the cohort settled, he walked to the kitchen area and stood in front of the open refrigerator for some time, thinking. For some reason, Sunny had a strong desire to cook up something special. Nephis must have been sick of eating monster meat for years… so…

Finally, he produced a number of ingredients and laid them out on the cooking surface, then started the preparations.

'Fried rice… fried rice should do the job. Omurice? Do I have eggs?'

As he went about it, the discussion reached a poignant moment. Cassie was finishing describing the important details of the reason for their tense relationship with Clan Valor.

"...And so, we accomplished our goal and Ascended. However, that man… Mordret… he must have Ascended, as well. His clan doesn't know that yet, so their response was only mildly aggressive. Sky Tide of White Feather took most of the blame for his escape and the consequent death of Saint Cormac. That did not save us from all fallout, sadly."

She paused, and then added somberly:

"They have secretly captured two of the loyalist Forgotten Shore survivors. The rest of us took shelter in the Dream Realm. For the past six months, Sunny's contact in the government acted as an intermediary to arrange a peaceful negotiation. It seems that Valor is finally ready to talk, but they aim to recruit at least one of us into their clan."

The blind girl sighed.

"The four of us are already a very important asset, but with the addition of the Fire Keepers, our value is nothing short of tremendous. If they can't get all of us, they are determined to at least make sure that we don't pledge allegiance to their competitors. Of course, now that you are here, the situation has become even more

fraught with tension. Valor will be much more motivated."

Cassie smiled weakly, and then said in an apologetic tone:

"Uh… I'm sorry to have to burden you with all that right after you return.

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then shook her head.

"No. You were right to inform me. Thank you."

A grim and thoughtful look appeared on her face.

Sunny, meanwhile, listened to the conversation silently. He was darkly perplexed by the fact that his life had turned out in such a way that encountering words like "loyalists", "government contact", and "allegiance" in a casual conversation did not seem out of place.

Effie, meanwhile, looked at Changing Star with curiosity and asked:

"I get what our problem with the great clans is. What's your problem with them? I thought that you, of all people, would have been chummy with the top Legacies, princess."

Nephis looked at her without any amusement.

"They want me dead."

The huntress blinked a couple of times.

"What? Why?"

Changing Star shrugged.

"You'll have to ask them."

Effie remained silent for a while, thinking. After some time, she frowned and asked:

"So was Caster…?"

Nephis simply nodded.

"He was."

Kai looked at them with confusion:

"He was what?"

Everyone turned to him, suddenly realizing that the archer was less informed about some of the darker secrets of what had happened on the Forgotten Shore than the rest of them. After a while, Effie shook her head.

"I mean… aren't you the walking lie detector? What do you think Caster was up to?"

Kai coughed.

"Oh… he was indeed a bit dishonest sometimes. But I just assumed that he was trying to hide his feeling for Lady Nephis…"

At that moment, Sunny walked over carrying seven plates. He held two in his hands, two more in shadowy limbs that played the role of a second pair of hands, balanced two on his forearms, and the seventh was swaying slightly on top of a tangible shadow that resembled a long tail.

Placing a plate of delicious, steaming omurice in front of Kai, he said with a crooked grin:

"Oh, he had feelings for her for sure. The feelings of wishing to kill her to complete his mission. Sadly, he stumbled on me first."

It was a sad thing, indeed. If Sunny had not killed Caster, if Nephis had known in advance that slaying the Crimson Terror would force the Spire to seek another conduit, if Cassie's vision had been more detailed… well, there was no point in feeling regret now. What had been done was done.

The current conversation just went to show that Kai's strange Flaw, while useful, was also often detrimental and misleading.

As Kai stared into the distance in stunned silence, Sunny placed the other plates on the table, pushed three of them toward Effie,

dismissed the shadows, and landed on a soft armchair.

Then, he picked up his utensils, smelled the omurice, and let out a satisfied sigh.

"What are you waiting for, fools? Dig in…"

Chapter-776: The Enemy of My Enemy

The omurice disappeared from the plates with a speed that made Sunny a bit full of himself. He smiled proudly, and then looked at Nephis:

"So, what do you think about the mess we're in?"

She put down her utensils, looked at the empty plate with a hint of regret, and then asked:

"That Mordret… the Rank of his Aspect is the same as ours?"

Sunny nodded, prompting her to frown. While she thought, he reluctantly added:

"He is also older and more powerful than us, and possesses more knowledge than anyone in the waking world should have. Other than that, he is… actually, I don't know what he is, I just feel that something is very wrong with that guy. Regardless, he is dead set on destroying Clan Valor. It is just hard to tell how he is going to go about accomplishing that goal."

Changing Star remained silent for a few moments, then said evenly:

"He is going to search for allies."

Sunny's expression grew a little darker.

"Mordret is not exactly a team player."

Nephis slowly shook her head.

"It doesn't matter. No matter how powerful he has become, it won't be enough to reach his goals. The… the enemy is too strong. Their

power is too absolute."

She did not say it, but from the grim expression on her face, Sunny could guess what Changing Star was thinking about. That she was in the exact same position.

Which did not bode well…

He grimaced.

"So… do you think that we should expect to find the bastard on our doorstep one day? The enemy of my enemy, and all that."

Sunny was not looking forward to meeting Mordret again, let alone getting entangled with him in any shape or form. As far as he was concerned, the Prince of Nothing would bring nothing but trouble.

Nephis frowned, then said with uncertainty:

"No… I doubt it."

Well, if she was right, that was a relief.

At that moment, Cassie deactivated her communicator and turned to face them.

"The Fire Keepers have reached the Immortal Flame manor. They are putting on a show to make it seem like there are all kinds of activity going on inside. Hopefully, that is going to make most people think that you are there with them. You should not be bothered by anyone here, for a while."

She paused for a moment, then sighed.

"But that is not going to last long. Maybe a week… the rest of us should not linger, as well. It would be strange if Kai, Effie, and I are not seen at the manor. We will leave shortly and join the Fire Keepers."

Which would leave Sunny and Nephis alone...

He did not know how to feel about that.

Effie, meanwhile, glanced at the empty plates and said in a petulant tone:

"I live here as well, you know!"

Cassie turned to her with a deadpan expression.

"Not for the next week, you don't."

As the huntress let out a sigh, the blind girl hesitated for a few seconds, and then said:

"I am also in contact with the government representatives and Clan Valor. They understand the pressure you are facing so soon after you return, so they are willing to be… patient. For now. That will buy you a short buffer before they come knocking. Be ready to receive some requests for public appearances and so on in a week or two, as well as demands to resume the negotiations.

We can stall for a time, but not forever."

Nephis looked at her calmly, then asked:

"What about Song and Night?"

Cassie frowned.

"Clan Song might try to get involved in the negotiations, but I don't expect them to be too forceful. They are in a more advantageous position than Valor right now, after all. As for the House of Night… they are remaining strangely passive these days, for some reason. Maybe they just know that they have less to offer than the other two great clans, and don't want to bother."

Sunny had a different explanation for why the Nightwalkers had less time to participate in the schemes of the two greater clans, but chose to remain silent. The information provided to him by Master Jet had been shared in confidence. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't go around spreading it.

The blind girl sighed, then rose from her seat.

"Try to rest well during this week, Neph. Don't neglect your recovery. We know that you are strong… but no one is truly infallible. Perhaps none of us has experienced as much pain as you had in these past few years, but we faced our share. Some more than others…"

She briefly faced Sunny, then turned away and lowered her head.

"So, we understand how precarious it is to go on as if nothing happened without giving the old wounds a chance to heal. Don't be stubborn and have some pity on yourself, for a change."

Nephis looked at her. After a few moments, a pale smile appeared on her face.

"You don't have to lecture me, Cas. You are overestimating my resolve. I am more than willing to rest for a while. Happy, even."

The words rest and happy hardly fit in the image of Changing Star they were accustomed to, but no one said anything. An ordeal like the one she had gone through was bound to change anyone, even someone as determined and unflinching as Nephis.

Cassie smiled, and then addressed Effie and Kai:

"Let's go, then. There's a lot of work to be done at the manor. We need to renovate it a little and make some adjustments to convert it into a proper clan headquarters."

Soon, they said their goodbyes and left. The PTV came online and swiftly disappeared from view.

Sunny and Nephis were left alone in the cozy grey house.

He hesitated for a bit, and then looked at her with a bit of awkwardness.

"Well… make yourself at home, I guess. Actually, let me give you a tour…"

Chapter-777: Blind Date

In one of the most upscale districts situated near the heart of the city, a fancy, but not overly opulent restaurant was welcoming the first few visitors of the day. While some owners made a point of following the archaic traditions and hired human servers, this particular establishment was aimed at at a mostly young audience.

For that reason, a lot of things were automated and could be easily accessed through personal communicators of the patrons. The chefs were still human, of course. They were also true masters of their craft. Every ingredient used by them was natural, as well, while some were even imported from other quadrants.

The interior design was similarly luxurious, with natural wood visible everywhere. Authentic paintings from centuries past hung on the walls, protected by thick sheets of transparent alloy. Everything was expensive, stylish, and screamed of class.

Such a restaurant, of course, was only accessible to citizens of the highest ranks, who could afford to dine here. It was especially popular among young heirs of the city elite, and had a reputation for being a prime spot for arranged dates and romantic occasions.

Currently, a couple of such meetings were taking place inside, with wealthy young men and women going through the awkward motions of attending a blind date arranged for them by their families.

Strangely, the most striking visitor of the famed restaurant sat alone, as if her date was running late.

The young woman seemed to be in her mid-twenties, but possessed elegance and grace that spoke of strange maturity. She was exquisitely beautiful, with a supple figure and flawless skin. The beauty was wearing a stylish red dress and a black leather jacket. A few tasteful pieces of jewerly adorned her fingers and delicate neck.

Other female visitors of the restaurant couldn't help but feel exasperated by the fact that their dates seemed to be unable to stop stealing glances at the beautiful woman. The men, meanwhile, were all wondering what kind of a fool would keep such a belle waiting. If only they were in his place, they wouldn't be so tardy!

Finally, the doors opened, and a new visitor came in. The young man looked around, scratched the back of his head, and then headed toward the table where the striking beauty sat alone.

Sitting down, he smiled sheepishly and said:

"Sorry for being late. I hope you did not have to wait too long."

The young woman smiled politely, revealing her pearly white teeth.

"No problem at all."

She studied the young man for a few moments, and then said with a bit of reproach in her pleasant, velvety voice:

"I hate to say it, but you don't look like the images I was shown at all."

He looked down, as if embarrassed.

"Oh… I had to wear something inconspicuous. Walking around as my usual self would be a bit too ostentatious. However, isn't it the same for you? All that makeup to hide your complexion…"

The young woman frowned.

"It is a cosmetic Memory, I'll have you know. Regardless… I have already ordered something to eat. You can peruse the menu while we wait."

The young man hesitated, then looked around with an amused expression. Finally, he asked:

"How do I do that?"

She glanced at him with curiosity:

"You don't know? Have you never been to a proper restaurant before?"

The young man smiled and shook his head, then said wistfully:

"To tell you the truth, this is my first time visiting a restaurant. I was raised in the Dream Realm, after all. I only returned to the waking world when I was around thirteen. Many things here seem very strange to me…"

With that, Mordret thumbled with his communicator for a bit and finally managed to open the menu. The body he was wearing used a biometric lock, at least… otherwise, he wouldn't have known how to access the communicator at all. He looked at all the options projected in front of him and asked:

"What do you recommend?"

The beauty smiled.

"I doubt that we have similar tastes."

At that moment, the dish she had ordered finally arrived. It was a steak, prepared so rare that it barely looked cooked at all. The young woman elegantly sliced a small piece and brought it to her sensual lips, which were as red as blood.

Mordret observed her with a pleasant expression.

"Ah, yes. I've heard that you and your sisters follow a very special diet, Lady Song."

The young woman licked her lips and looked at him with a neutral expression.

"Just call me Seishan. There's no need to be formal."

He smiled.

"So, Seishan… why did she send you, of all people? Are you so expendable that the Queen does not mind sacrificing you to me, should the date go badly?"

Song Sei Shan calmly ate another piece of the steak, then wiped her lips with a napkin.

"Why would our date go badly? We have a common goal, after all. Our clan is your best chance to achieve it."

Mordret thought for a bit, then nodded and sighed.

"True. However, with that Antarctica thing going on, I would have thought that she would be reluctant to move forward. After all, it's not the best time to do anything drastic."

Seishan studied the Prince of War for a few moments, and then smiled.

"Oh, on the contrary. We think that the event in Antarctica sets the best stage to do something drastic."

He hesitated for a while, then shrugged.

"Well, fair enough. So, what now? Do I have to kneel and recite a vow? Kiss your ring? Or do something else?"

The beauty shook her head.

"Usually, you would have had to sign a contract with a drop of your blood. However, considering your propensity to change... attires… that would hardly do anything, wouldn't it?"

She smiled.

"So, there's no need. Welcome to Clan Song, Prince Mordret. I look forward to all the great things we will accomplish together."

Mordret reciprocated her smile, then chose a couple of options in the menu and pressed them.

Then, he sighed and said with a bit of amusement:

"Ah… it feels strange to be adopted…"

Chapter-778: In the Shadows

Eventually, Sunny and Nephis ended up in his underground dojo. Changing Star looked around, her gaze lingering on the racks of training weapons and the deactivated sleeping pod that stood forlornly in its alcove, all but forgotten by its former occupant.

After a few moments of silence, she asked:

"Do you make use of all these weapons?"

Sunny glanced at the training equipment, lingered for a moment, then shook his head.

"Yes and no. In the past two years, I did expand my repertoire to include all kinds of sharp implements. But I practice with something better."

He was still most confident when wielding swords akin to Azure Blade, Midnight Shard, and his serpentine odachi. His proficiency with spears was also quite high, and he was steadily improving his archery skill. However, while Sunny had learned enough to feel comfortable with other types of weapons as well, he had a long way to go before truly mastering them.

Nephis nodded thoughtfully.

"Do you use the... Soul Serpent?"

Sunny stared at her for a moment, then looked away.

"Yes."

He was reminded of the Shadow Bond that connected them. Beyond its main function, it also allowed Sunny to peer into some of Changing Star's secrets. However, she was able to learn a lot of his, as

well.

Sunny had suspected that this was the case from the very start, but now those suspicions were confirmed.

He remained silent for a few moments, then suddenly grinned.

"Were you surprised?"

Nephis looked at him, hesitated for a moment, and said:

"I was. Very... very much."

She sighed, sat down on the floor, and crossed her legs.

"I always knew that you were extraordinary. I just didn't… didn't think that you possessed a Divine Aspect, too. To be honest, I thought that I was the first."

Sunny sat down opposite her and shook his head.

"Yeah, I thought so too. But neither of us was the first. It was Mordret, instead. He is older than us by four or five years, and had his First Nightmare when he was twelve. So… he received a Divine Aspect when you were around eight, and I was around seven."

He paused, and said with a bitter smile:

"Come to think of it, he probably became a Sleeper around the time my mother died. Oh… your mother is fine, by the way. Cassie and I visited her from time to time, while you were gone."

As a hint of emotion appeared on Neph's face, she lowered her head.

"...Thank you."

Then, she lingered for a moment and asked:

"Do you mind telling me where the Divine Memory in your possession came from? The… Weaver's Mask?"

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Do I mind? I do. But I'll tell you anyway… I found it below the cathedral in the Dark City, on an ancient corpse that turned to dust as soon as I took the mask from it."

Changing Star tilted her head a little.

"Do you mind telling me what it does?"

He laughed.

"Why not? I'll tell you... it can reverse one's Flaw."

A sudden silence settled in the dark chamber. Nephis looked at him, a hint of longing and pain reflecting in her striking eyes. Sunny grinned.

"Why? Do you want to take it from me? All you have to do is to say the word. It's not like I can refuse."

She stared at him for a long time, then silently turned away and did not say anything.

Sunny's grin turned somber.

"...Good decision. Did you think that it will save you from the pain? It won't. The Mask does not nullify the Flaw, it just reverses it. No matter what, the Flaw is still a curse. By now, we both should have a good sense about such things… chances are, the new curse would be more terrible than the old.

Right now, you have to burn yourself alive every time you actively use your Aspect. With the help of the Mask, you would most likely be burning without reprieve, forever, unless you were using it."

He grew silent, and then added:

"The Mask can also kill you in many other ways. It is… too powerful to be used lightly. At least by the likes of us."

Nephis hesitated for a few moments, then gritted her teeth.

"It is fine. I don't need to be liberated from my Flaw. I don't need a

powerful Memory to uplift me. I… I myself am enough."

Sunny stared at her, then shook his head.

"You are exactly the same… you did not change at all. I thought that two years of despair would have made you a little smarter. But you are still clinging to your deranged dreams, aren't you?"

She looked at him, remained silent for a while, and then smiled with the corner of her mouth.

Despite the smile, however, her eyes remained calm and cold.

"Two years? No… I've been desperate for much longer than that, Sunny. Why would I change now?"

He let out a long sigh, then looked to the side.

"Indeed. So… Aster, Song, Vale. They are your next targets, aren't they?"

She nodded silently, prompting him to add:

"You told me once that just knowing these words can get a person killed. However, I went ahead and did some digging of my own. Aster, Song and Vale are Asterion, Ki Song, and Anvil of Valor, correct? The former members of your father's cohort?"

Nephis nodded again, looking at him intensely. Sunny scowled.

"They are also known as the Sovereigns. Because… because they have conquered the Fourth Nightmare. They are one Rank above the Transcendent. They are Supreme, are they not?"

Without saying anything, she just nodded for the third time. Sunny hesitated for a while, and then asked:

"...They killed your father, didn't they?"

Nephis continued to look at him, white flame dancing in her eyes. After some time, she sighed.

"Yes. I believe so. My father… he died when I was four. Before that, the members of his cohort were like aunts and uncles to me. Aster, Song, Vale… that was what he called them. They were his friends."

Her expression turned dark.

"But after he was gone, something changed. I was too little to understand, but none of these… friends… came to our help. Instead, the Immortal Flame clan fell while their clans soared. And a couple of years after that, the first assassin was sent to eliminate me."

Sunny rubbed his face, then asked in an exasperated voice:

"But why? Why did they turn on him?"

Nephis looked away.

"...I don't know."

He frowned and hesitated for a moment. He had suspected that he would receive such an answer. However, there was one small detail that did not make sense to him.

"If they are so mighty and powerful… then how are you still alive? Why did the Sovereigns fail to kill you? All they had to do was pay you a visit in person. No amount of Awakened guards, or even Masters, would have been able to stop even one of them."

Neph glanced at him and said, her voice even:

"They can't."

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"What do you mean, they can't? Is there some agreement that prevents them from acting directly?"

Changing Star slowly shook her head.

"No. They simply can't. The Sovereigns… it is hard for them to enter the waking world."

Chapter-779: Unmoored

Noticing the astonished look on his face, Nephis sighed.

"You must have felt a change in your connection to the Dream Realm and the Waking World when you Ascended. Didn't you?"

Sunny slowly nodded, remembering how he first explored his ability to enter the Dream Realm physically. The process wasn't instantaneous, but it also wasn't too burdensome. He just had to concentrate, feel his connection to the anchor, and reach for it. After a few minutes, he would poof out of existence in reality and appear near the Gateway in the Ivory Tower.

Leaving a tether in the waking world wasn't hard, either, although it took more time and some essence. It was as instinctual as summoning Memories or commanding Echoes.

With the knowledge Sunny had received from being collared in the Red Colosseum, he understood that this hinted at the fact that traveling between the two worlds was one of the functions of the Spell, as opposed to something tied to his Aspect.

After he nodded, Changing Star continued:

"Awakened establish a connection with the Dream Realm by anchoring themselves to a Gateway. Ascended expand on that connection, making them less tied to the Waking World, and thus capable of traveling between the two at will. Transcendent exist in a state of perfect balance. They are connected to both worlds in equal measure, which makes them independent of Gateways.

In a sense, they are the Gateway… which is why they can even bring another person with them in their travels."

She paused, and then added in a somber tone:

"However… that balance is broken once a person becomes Supreme. It shifts, tying them to the Dream Realm instead of the real world. In truth, I don't know much about the power of the Sovereigns. All I know is that it is restricted in the waking world, and that they can't enter it freely. That is why… that is why none of them could harm me directly."

Sunny stared, shocked.

That revelation… it made so much sense. It explained so many things, from how Nephis was able to survive to why the government still wielded a lot of power in the waking world.

It also gave credence to Master Jet's statement that the Sovereigns had long given up on reality.

Was that what awaited Sunny if he somehow became Supreme one day, himself?

Feeling as if the world was spinning around him, Sunny frowned, and then asked in a dark tone:

"...What happens if one becomes Sacred, then? Would they lose their connection to the real world entirely?"

Nephis shrugged.

"I don't know. No one knows. No one has ever conquered the Fifth Nightmare, after all."

A heavy silence settled between them. After a while, Sunny suddenly asked:

"...What are Domains?"

He had not forgotten that detail, either. Back on the Ashen Barrow, Nephis had asked him which Domain he belonged to. He had not known what she meant then, and he did not know now.

Neph sighed.

"That… I am not entirely sure, myself. All I know is that each

Sovereign rules over a Domain. It is an expression of a… a function of the Aspect, distinct from Abilities, but sharing a lot in common with them. In practice, it is synonymous with their authority and the territories they control, as well as people that serve them."

She paused for a few moments, and then added grimly:

"The Sovereigns are already immensely powerful… but within their Domains, they are practically invincible. Not even Saints can hope to challenge them."

Sunny let out a stifled laugh.

"And these… these are the people you want to destroy?"

Changing Star smiled.

"Why not? Nothing is absolute, Sunny. Two years ago, I would have never challenged a Sovereign. Today… today, I am still too weak to do it. I am still insignificant. But will it still be the case two years from now?

Will I still be as weak, and will they still be as powerful? What about in five years? Things never remain the same. Everything is always changing… even gods can die. Asterion, Ki Song, and Anvil of Valor are no gods, so why should they be spared?"

Sunny shook his head.

"I don't know. Forget about two years from now, or five, or ten. How are you going to survive now? How are you going to avoid being squashed by them today? What is your actual plan?"

Nephis looked at him for a long time, and then sighed.

"I don't have a plan."

She remained silent for a moment before adding evenly:

"...Yet."

Sunny did not know what to say, so he simply shook his head.

It was pointless trying to dissuade her from her obsession, regardless. Nephis wanted to destroy the Spell, and the Sovereigns stood in her way. It was as simple as that, with an added weight of good old-fashioned vengeance.

He was not so sure that she was completely misguided, either… not anymore.

Sunny wanted nothing to do with the Sovereigns and the great clans, but was there really a choice? Simply by daring to be someone and possess something, he put himself in their crosshairs. As long as he had something of value, others would want to either take it away or make him serve them.

That was the nature of the world. Since the great clans insisted on being in control of humanity, there was no escape from them. Unless Sunny wanted to spend the rest of his life as a hermit in the Dream Realm, he would have to interact with the… Domains… in one way or another.

He would have to allow himself to be controlled, as well.

A bitter smile appeared on his lips.

'Isn't that ironic…'

Why was it so hard to gain even a tiny bit of freedom in this damned world? Sunny wanted to become strong to be free, but the stronger he became, the more formidable powers wanted to subjugate him.

Now, it seemed that the only choice he had was to either give up, or become even stronger still… stronger than anyone, and anything.

Which was more or less exactly what Nephis was trying to achieve, even if for a different reason.

He sighed, and then waved a hand dismissively.

"Anyway, I'm tired of this conversation. Want to spar?"

Chapter-780: Friendly Spar

Sunny and Nephis stood opposite each other, holding training swords. Both felt more than a little disturbed by how much this scene resembled their bitter confrontation at the very top of the Crimson Spire.

Of course, today, the situation was completely different. They were just going for a friendly spar, not a battle to the death. There were no stakes in this training fight, no emotional investment… no complicated mixture of regret, fury, and resentment.

…So why did Sunny feel as though he had to prove something?

Forcing himself to relax, he glanced at Nephis and attacked. Their swords met with a deafening clangor.

A few seconds later, Sunny jumped away and shouted:

"Stop! Stop! Stop!"

Changing Star froze while he looked around, breathing heavily.

Sunny gritted his teeth and spat a muffled curse.

"Damnation…"

His idea to have a spar might not have been the wisest one he ever had. Yes, the underground dojo was designed specifically to allow Awakened to train their powers. It was isolated, reinforced, and heavily armored, able to transform into an impregnable bunker in case a Gate opened nearby and a tide of Nightmare Creatures flooded the district.

The interior was furnished with heavy plates of armor-grade ceramic alloy and supplied with training equipment meant to withstand the

rigors of Awakened power.

…However, Sunny and Nephis weren't Awakened anymore! They were full-fledged Masters, and abnormal ones at that!

The alloy sword in his hand was shattered. A few plates on the floor were broken. If this continued, the repair bill for the dojo was going to really sting Sunny's wallet.

More than that… Nephis was not exactly at her best. She had just returned to the waking world yesterday. Before that, she had been a Sleeper, which meant that she had no experience of controlling soul essence whatsoever. Let alone doing it with intricate precision and efficiency of a Master, she had never even done it crudely as an Awakened.

Sunny could tell exactly how chaotic and unrestrained the flow of her essence was, because Shadow Dance now allowed him to sense the movement of the mystical energy through the bodies of his opponents.

Sure, every Master had an instinctual understanding of how to augment their physicality with essence, but it still took some time to get used to it, and even more to master it. However, every Ascended before Changing Star enjoyed having the experience of making the first steps on that long and arduous road as an Awakened.

In fact, by the time Awakened reached Ascension, controlling essence was as natural to them as breathing.

Not so much for Nephis. Her return as a Master might have been miraculous, but it also deprived her of a lot of things that people who did not break the natural order of things usually enjoyed.

She was out of her depth.

As Changing Star stared at the broken sword in her hands with a deep frown, Sunny waved a hand in the air and forced out a smile.

"That… you'll have to spend some time learning how to guide your soul essence. After that, you will have to spend even more time relearning how to fight with its help. I had years of practice already,

so fighting at full force won't do us any good."

He thought for a bit, and then said:

"Alright, let's try this again, but without using any essence at all. It will be a pure test of skill…"

Sure, Nephis had one more core than him. But with all things considered, if both of them neglected using essence or augmenting themselves with their Abilities, the gap in physical prowess should not have been too overwhelming.

Once again, they stood opposite each other and concentrated. Each discarded their broken weapons and took new ones.

A moment later, they clashed.

This time, things went better. However… not by much.

One of the problems was their battle techniques. Due to Shadow Dance and his familiarity with Nephis, it didn't take Sunny long to sense the core of her style. It had changed a lot and matured over the past two years, but so did his mastery of his Aspect Legacy.

Although Sunny could not master the style yet, he attuned himself to its flow and cadence enough to be able to predict some of Neph's moves with a good degree of precision.

The problem, then… was that Changing Star herself could do more or less the same. Her ability to discern, predict, and control patterns of combat was not based in affinity to shadows, and was sufficiently different from it… but achieved a similar result. It was the product of her talent, training, and incredible combat intelligence.

As the result, Sunny was able to somewhat predict what Nephis was thinking of doing, while she could predict that he had predicted her actions, and change her approach on the fly… which he would also discern, and so on.

It was very confusing. Sunny had never found himself in a battle that demanded so much mental gymnastics before. He was not even entirely sure what was happening! There had to be a solution for this

predicament, of course, but he had no time to come up with one yet.

However… that was just half of the problem.

The other half was that Neph's essence control was so rudimentary and bad that she couldn't even prevent herself from instinctively using it. As the result, Sunny had to endure sudden outbursts of speed, strength, and agility that were too chaotic to predict. Because he was holding himself back, handling this pressure was rather troublesome.

At some point, Changing Star overdid it during one of her strikes, causing her second training sword to shatter, as well. The jagged end slid forward and bit into Sunny's cheek.

Drops of blood fell to the floor.

Sunny jerked back and grimaced, feeling that the left side of his face was seriously torn. The wound was bad enough to cause Blood Weave to shed a few drops. It was nothing that he wouldn't be able to heal quickly, of course… but it still hurt!

...Before he could say anything, Nephis suddenly reached forward and placed a cool palm on his torn cheek. In the next moment, a brilliant white radiance illuminated the underground dojo.

His pain instantly disappeared, replaced instead by relief and gentle warmth. He felt... he felt as though he was being cleansed by something pure, precious, and sacred.

A pristine white flame.

Standing close to each other, the two of them froze for a moment. Neph's hand rested on Sunny's cheek, which was swiftly healing. The soft radiance emanating from her skin reflected in her calm, grey eyes.

Beneath that calmness, there were pain and suffering in them.

Sunny moved slightly, wishing to say that she didn't have to do this.

Before he had the time to speak, however, something unexpected

happened.

The white flames suddenly seeped under his skin…

And then engulfed him.

Chapter-781: The Brightest Light

Sunny shuddered, thinking that he was caught on fire... but then froze. Somehow, it did not seem like the white radiance was harming him at all. It just enveloped his body, making his skin shine with a suffused glow.

However, it was also not healing him.

Instead…

Sunny stared at Nephis with astonishment and asked in a low voice:

"What… what is happening?"

From the confused look on her face, she did not do whatever it was that had happened on purpose. Changing Star took an involuntary step back, removing her cool palm from his cheek, and briefly glanced at her hand.

The white glow was gone from it.

"I... I don't know."

Sunny opened his eyes wide and looked down on his shining body. Very strangely, he felt…

Empowered.

In fact, his condition was very similar to how he felt when one of his shadows was wrapped around him. His physical prowess seemed to have doubled. There were small differences, of course. The augmentation of Neph's flame seemed to be more furious and active, centered around strength and resilience. It also filled him with a soft,

pleasant feeling of warmth.

What was more, it did not only affect his body. It reached into his soul, as well, igniting and enhancing it. The shadow essence flowing through his body became much more potent and vibrant, full of greater energy.

Sunny blinked.

Did Nephis just… augment him with her Aspect Ability?

"Since when can you augment other people?!"

Changing Star seemed to be as bewildered as he was, even though it did not show on her face.

"I can't! This… this was not supposed to happen. My Dormant Ability only evolved to include soul augmentation when I Ascended, it never evolved to be able to spread to other people!"

Sunny opened his mouth, then closed it again. Eventually, he hissed:

"Then how do you explain this?! I'm glowing!"

He waved his hand in the air, causing the shadows of the underground dojo to move and shift.

Then, a bizarre thought entered his mind.

"Wait…"

Following his suspicion, Sunny lingered for a moment, and then commanded the gloomy shadow to wrap itself around Nephis.

The shadow did not even roll its eyes as it usually did when receiving an order. It eagerly slid forward and swiftly wrapped itself around the lithe, slender body of Changing Star.

Neph flinched.

"Huh?"

She studied her arms with wide eyes. Her ivory skin had turned grey,

as if covered by dark film. Then, she made her hands into fists and frowned.

"I feel stronger..."

The two of them remained silent for a few moments, processing the implications of this unexpected discovery. Usually, Sunny felt a lot of negative emotions every time he thought about the Innate Ability of his Aspect, Shadow Bond, which tied him to Changing Star's will.

On this occasion, however, his curiosity and greed for power briefly overpowered his resentment.

If Shadow Bond allowed Nephis and him to augment each other to this degree… what else would they be capable of?

Neph seemed to come to the same conclusion. They glanced at each other, understanding the other's thoughts without having to say anything.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then said:

"It causes you pain to use your Ability. We can stop now."

She slowly shook her head.

"No… not yet…"

With that, Sunny simply nodded and commanded the gloomy shadow to return and wrap itself around his body. At the same time, he ordered the other three to do the same.

Changing Star, meanwhile, concentrated for a moment, causing the white radiance suffusing his skin to grow many times more intense.

Sunny let out an audible gasp.

Four shadows made him five times more powerful. That he already knew.

Flames summoned by Nephis — who was a Tyrant — were more or less akin to five additional shadows. In theory, his physical prowess

should have grown tenfold as the result.

What a stupendous augmentation! Combined with his might as a Master, his four cores, and the subtle but consequential physical enhancement he received from Blood Weave, Sunny should have become monstrously strong.

But in reality…

The effect was even greater.

The shadows and the brilliant light seemed to resonate with each other, making the sum greater than its parts. Sunny turned into a silhouette shrouded in broiling darkness. That darkness, however, was permeated with blinding white light. The light made the darkness deeper, while the darkness made the light much more stark and radiant.

He looked like an abyssal spirit of the starlit void.

He felt… powerful. Immensely powerful.

Powerful enough to face a Saint in a fight.

He looked at the training sword grasped in his hand, and easily made the reinforced alloy shatter in his grip. He did not even have to exert a lot of his strength.

Deeply stunned, Sunny whispered:

"Scary…"

A few moments later, Nephis sighed and recalled her flames. Sunny allowed his shadows to slide back to the floor.

Changing Star looked at him and asked, her voice unsure:

"How did it feel?"

Sunny remained silent for a while.

Eventually, he forced out a pale smile and said:

"Like a dream…"

***

They stayed in the dojo for the entire night, experimenting with the strange and frighteningly powerful application of their unnatural bond. There were many things they had to explore, even though it was too dangerous to test the limits of this new power here.

The last thing Sunny wanted was to completely wreck the foundation of his home. It wouldn't have been fun if the whole building suddenly collapsed…

Still, there were a lot of things that they had discovered.

First, both Sunny and Nephis could be enhanced by the white flames and the shadows. All of this might could be concentrated on one person, or shared between them in any proportion they chose. Mixing any light into the shadows or even one shadow into the radiant light made the end result more powerful.

Secondly, the same could be done to their Memories. Pouring all of their power into the Cruel Sight, for example, made it somewhere around fifteen times deadlier. This scale of enhancement went well beyond the confines of its Rank, making the somber spear as powerful as a Transcendent weapon. Applied to an armor, the augmentation was just as strong.

However, doing so would have been a bit wasteful. Memories had no souls, and as such, the part of Changing Star's flames that made a person's soul more active and resilient was wasted on them.

…It did, however, affect Shadows and Echoes.

Sunny and Nephis tested the full augmentation of their combined Aspects on Saint first, and then on the Echo of a six-armed Ascended Demon that Changing Star possessed.

The result was as frightening as what Sunny had experienced himself.

As the dawn painted the world in shades of pale violet and lilac, the pair was still cooped up in the underground dojo. Although neither

spoke, their eyes were full of thought.

Both understood what their discovery meant. Each of them bore a Divine Aspect. Each was immensely powerful when compared to other Ascended.

When two bearers of Divine Aspects combined their power, however…

Imagining what they could do was indeed a bit scary.

After a while, Sunny glanced at his communicator and flinched.

"Crap! It's morning already! I am going to be late for my lecture!"

He looked at Nephis, suddenly realizing how tired and spent she looked. Using her Ability so much must not have been easy…

She simply nodded.

"You can go if you wish. I'll… I'll rest for a while."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then nodded and used Shadow Step to jump to his closet on the second floor of the house.

A few minutes later, he was already running out of the door, wearing civilian clothes that Kai had helped him pick a while ago.

Changing Star was left alone.

Chapter-782: Grand Teacher

On the way back from school, Rain couldn't think about anything else except for the news that she had heard from her classmates. At first, she had dismissed them as a wild rumor, but then her inquisitive nature forced her to check the respectable government portals to make sure. A minute of research revealed that the rumors were true.

Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan, the lost hero of the Forgotten Shore, had Ascended and returned to the real world. She was alive!

'Can't be…'

By now, the news was spreading across the network like wildfire. Rain could tell that many of the passengers riding the train with her were thinking and talking about the same thing. Everyone looked shocked and excited.

She did not pay other people any attention, however. There was only one thought on her mind.

She had to tell Sunny!

Her friend and mentor was a member of Changing Star's cohort, after all. More than that, from the hints she had received from Effie and a short conversation she had had with Sunny, Rain knew that there was much more between the two than simple camaraderie.

He had basically admitted as much.

'Sunny will be so happy!'

Despite the fact that she was not supposed to have the next lesson with her young tutor for a few days, Rain decided to bring him the news personally... and right away! She simply couldn't wait. Of

course, in all her excitement, she had failed to account for the fact that if the news were indeed true, Sunny would have been one of the first people to learn of it.

Full of anticipation, Rain rushed from the tram station to her mentor's house, opened the door, and walked inside. Throwing her backpack into the corner by habit, she took off her shoes and shouted:

"Sunny! Sunny! Are you home? You won't believe…"

Then, however, the teenage girl froze with her mouth wide open.

As she watched in stunned silence, the curtain hanging over the entrance to the guest bedroom parted, and a tall, incredibly beautiful young woman walked into the living room. Suddenly, it seemed as if sunlight pouring through the windows became a little bit brighter.

The young woman was slender and graceful, with flawless ivory skin and striking grey eyes. Her face was calm, aloof, and strangely mesmerizing. What shocked Rain much more, however, was that the beautiful stranger's skin glistened with moisture, as if she had just left the shower. She was wearing nothing but one of Sunny's black shirts, leaving her long legs mostly bare.

And her wet hair… her hair… was of a strange silver-white color.

The silver-haired young woman walked toward the kitchen, then stopped and looked at Rain. A hint of confusion appeared on her face. She hesitated for a moment, then said:

"...Hey."

Rain raised a trembling hand and pointed a finger at the stranger's head. Her teeth chattered as she forced out:

"You're… you're… you're…"

The beautiful stranger raised an eyebrow and remained silent. Rain finally managed to finish her sentence:

"You're Changing Star!"

The last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan tilted her head a little, then shrugged.

"Yes, I am. Who are you?"

Rain swallowed, slowly realizing that she was in the presence of one of the most talented battle commanders and heroes of humanity… a person so renowned that there was hardly anyone in the entire world who did not know her name… and Sunny's… Sunny's…

Remembering the lessons he had taught her, the teenage girl forced herself to calm down — somewhat — and said weakly:

"I am… I am Rain. Sunny is my teacher."

Changing Star remained silent for a moment, studying the unexpected guest. Then, a small hint of a smile appeared on her beautiful face.

"Really? Well... I used to be your teacher's teacher. I guess that makes me your grand-teacher."

Rained opened her eyes wide.

"Wha…"

Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan… was her what?

The concept simply failed to register.

The supposed grand teacher, meanwhile, walked over to the kitchen counter and poured herself some water. She drank it, then looked at Rain. After a few seconds of silence, she said:

"I'll be staying here for a few days. You can call me Neph."

Rain slowly nodded, not quite sure what she was just told.

Was she sleeping? Was the famous Lady of the Immortal Flame clan in front of her… wearing Sunny's shirt… telling Rain to call her by her first name? A nickname, even…

If that bastard Sunny had not subjected Rain to stumbling into Song of the Fallen, Raised by Wolves, and Nightingale, she would have probably fainted by now. As it was, Rain was barely able to remain on her feet.

Lady Changing Star… Neph… looked at her attentively, and then suddenly asked a strange question:

"Rain… does your home have a big window and a lawn?"

Rain silently nodded.

"Yes? Why?"

Neph lingered for a moment, and then turned away.

"Just wondering."

Then, she looked toward the living room area and sipped her water.

"Oh. By the way, do you know how to control the entertainment system of this house?"

Rain nodded again.

"Uh… yes, I do."

Changing Star smiled with satisfaction.

"Great. I was told that there is a movie about me. Can you put it on the projector?"

Rain made a deep breath, obediently walked over to the projector, connected it to her communicator, and searched for the Song of Light and Darkness on the network.

A few minutes later, she found herself sitting on the sofa next to Master Changing Star… the legendary heiress of Immortal Flame… as the somber music reverberated all around them. The movie was starting.

'Am I… am I dreaming? This can't be real, can it?'

On the wall in front of them, the interior of a spacious and brightly lit room appeared. A handsome man with dark circles under his eyes was studying a map… while a little girl with silver hair was playing on a carpet near him.

The man was speaking:

"...we, Awakened, only raise arms to protect humanity!"

Sitting next to Rain, Nephis sighed and palmed her face.

Chapter-783: Captive Audience

Projected onto the wall, a languid jade beauty with a slim waist and long eyelashes was traversing a labyrinth of crimson coral, her voluptuous figure barely covered by a flimsy seaweed attire. A teenage boy of about thirteen years of age was scurrying along as he shouted:

"...Are you crazy?!"

Sitting on the sofa near the real Changing Star, Rain felt like sinking into the earth. As the movie went by, her cheeks slowly turned bright red. The daughter of the Immortal Flame clan, on the contrary, became increasingly more deadpan and devoid of emotion. By now, her face was so still that it seemed paralyzed.

Rain awkwardly cleared her throat.

"Uh… come to think of it, the actress they chose does not look like you at all. You are much prettier!"

Nephis shifted and briefly glanced down. Then, she said evenly:

"Thank you."

After a while, she added:

"Why would they cast a child to play Sunny? What a strange decision. Only a complete fool could mistake him for a young boy."

Rain let out a nervous laugh.

"Yeah! Yeah… definitely…"

She looked away in utter embarrassment, and then forced out:

"And what is up with that stupid catchphrase? That does not sound

like something Sunny would say at all!"

Changing Star moved, suddenly becoming a little more lively.

"Oh, no. That actually happened. A lot!"

The movie, meanwhile, continued. The three Sleepers braved the wilderness of the Forgotten Shore and eventually reached the Dark City. The brief moment of liveliness passed, and instead, Changing Star seemed to grow more rigid and cold with each scene. Rain felt so uncomfortable that she could not bring herself to say anything.

What kind of idiot directed that stupid movie?!

Meanwhile, a handsome young man with broad shoulders and a noble bearing appeared on the screen. Rain glanced at Lady Nephis curiously, wondering how much of what was shown about her relationship with the heroic Han Li Caster was true.

And how her apparent relationship with Sunny fit into it.

Could it be… that there had been an actual love triangle between them?!

Sadly, she failed to glimpse anything from Changing Star's stoic face. The movie progressed, slowly reaching its culmination.

On the wall, the masculine face of the actor playing Sir Caster radiated courage and passion. Holding the grief-stricken jade beauty by the hand, he looked her in the eyes and said with passion:

"Should I fall, do not cry for me, my lady. My life does not matter… but yours does! Immortal Flame must never be extinguished! As long as it burns, humanity still has hope! The Dreamers of the Dark City have hope! As long as you live, I can face a thousand deaths with a triumphant smile!"

Rain shifted uncomfortably.

'Is it me, or is it getting hot in here?'

Not a single muscle moved on Changing Star's face. She looked at the

projection with a deadpan expression.

…The projection, however, suddenly stuttered.

Rain frowned.

'Huh?'

In the next moment, she thought that she smelled smoke. Turning around, the teenage girl noticed a thin stream of it rising from inside Sunny's expensive projector.

'That's strange...'

Rain opened her mouth to say something, but before she could...

The projector suddenly exploded.

***

After the movie was suddenly and violently interrupted, Rain only stayed for long enough to help Changing Star clean up the debris of the malfunctioned projector. Then, she found an excuse, grabbed her backpack, and hurriedly left.

Who knew what was going to explode next!

Once the teenage girl was gone, Nephis was once again left alone in the empty house. She lingered for a bit, then went back into the guest bedroom and rummaged through Effie's closet. She had no clothes apart from the tracksuit that the Academy had issued to her, which was soaked with sweat after the night she had spent with Sunny underground.

There were Memories, of course… but she had worn armor for the better part of the last three years. Putting on something mundane was strangely comforting.

Leaving Sunny's shirt on, she found a pair of gym shorts to match it. Sadly, other articles of Effie's clothing did not fit her too well. She was going to have to do some shopping soon...

Considering such matters again felt very strange.

Eventually, Nephis found herself back in the living room with nothing to do. She simply sat in silence for a while, trying to deal with the disturbing oddity of not being in danger. Then, she shifted uncomfortably, looked around, and took out the state-of-the-art communicator the government provided to her.

She stared at it for some time, then tentatively accessed the network.

After a while, Neph found herself senselessly scrolling through popular clips. A few minutes later, one video caught her attention.

A demonic figure in black armor and fearsome mask stood in a small clearing in the middle of a thick forest, a long blade of an odachi resting on his shoulder. The swordsman's white hair moved slightly in the wind. Something about him seemed… odd.

Suddenly, twelve figures appeared from behind the trees, surrounding the demonic swordsman. One of the ambushers spoke:

"Sorry, Mongrel… no hard feeling, right?"

Nephis shook her head slightly and sighed.

"Twelve against one…"

The man in black armor, meanwhile, remained silent for a moment and then said calmly:

"...None whatsoever."

Already knowing how the fight would end, Neph moved her finger to scroll on… but then stopped.

Something very unexpected was happening on the screen of her communicator!

Instead of being instantly overwhelmed, the warrior dodged several attacks and dove through a stream of scorching fire, his black armor reflecting the crimson flames like the scales of an infernal monster. His gauntlet collided against the head of one of the enemies, instantly

breaking the skull.

White sparks slowly ignited in the depths of Neph's eyes.

"Interesting…"

She lingered, watching the brutal slaughter with a hint of excitement. After spending years fighting against overwhelming odds, Nephis couldn't help but root for the lonesome swordsman.

A few seconds later, she was fully engrossed in the video.

"Remarkable!"

Chapter-784: Single Whole

The second lecture had turned out to be a challenge for Sunny. Not because he felt unprepared to teach the less experienced Awakened, but because all of them were very enthused and full of questions about Changing Star's return.

The whole Academy was abuzz.

"Master Sunless, have you met Lady Changing Star?"

"Is it true? Did she Ascend?!"

"Are you going to join the Immortal Flame clan now? Can we join, too?!"

Normally, that would not have been a problem. Sadly for Sunny, he could not refuse to answer any question due to his Flaw, so it took some time and ingenuity to not let anything important slip while reigning the students in. Eventually, he forced them to concentrate on the lecture.

After the lecture was over, he had to take care of some administrative issues, as well as visit Teacher Julius and assist the old man with a few tasks. Seeing that his assistant was very eager to leave, the elderly Instructor did not keep Sunny long and soon let him go with a knowing smile.

"Ah, youth…"

Sunny frowned a little as he hurried to the door.

'What is that supposed to mean?'

Throwing the confusion out of his mind, Sunny decided to not waste time and used Shadow Step to reach the train station as fast as

possible. On the way home, he was deep in thought.

After the night of experimenting and exploring their bond, he was very curious what else Nephis and he could do. As far as Sunny understood it, Shadow Bond made it so that their souls were strangely considered to be two parts of a single whole, at least when applied to the function of their Aspects.

So… did that mean that he could pull Neph with him through the shadows when using Shadow Step?

If he used a charm like Blood Blossom, would its effect be shared to her?

If so, would the boost granted to them remain the same, or grow twice as weak?

He had many questions like that, and answers to them could only be found through further experimentation. Sunny was very excited.

Why wouldn't he be? He was always resentful of his weakness and of the fact that stronger Awakened or powerful Nightmare Creatures could snuff out his life without too much trouble. Anything that could grant him more power to defend himself was a boon, and the memory of how powerful he had felt last night was still fresh in his mind.

Of course, reality was not so simple…

Firstly, any experiment would demand Neph to go through torturous pain.

Secondly, he had not forgotten that this power came at a cost.

The cost was his freedom.

Nephis seemed to be reluctant to use the Shadow Bond to compel him to do her bidding, but he could not be completely sure of her intentions. Not until they talked openly about it.

It was just that… he didn't want to have that talk yet. Talking openly about anything was the last thing he usually wanted to do.

'Later… I'll do it later…'

Neph was barely out of the Nightmare. Sunny himself had not been in the best of shapes after Ascending, for a while.

It was better to give her some time to balance herself.

…Soon, he was nearing his house. The security system automatically scanned his biometrics and unlocked the door. Opening it, Sunny walked inside and took off his shoes. Then , he looked around and noticed Neph sitting on a tall stool near the kitchen counter, staring at her communicator with strange intensity. Her eyes were burning, and it seemed as if she had spent a lot of time without moving.

She seemed to be so engrossed with what was happening on the screen that she did not even pay attention to his return. Clenching her fist, Neph suddenly spoke:

"Come on. You can do it. She is good, but you are better!"

He blinked a couple of times, unaccustomed to hearing such enthusiasm in Changing Star's voice. She was usually far more reserved. And what did she mean? What was he supposed to do? Who was he better than?

'Ah, she must be talking to herself. But what the hell is she watching?'

Sunny took a few steps forward and looked over Neph's shoulder.

A strange expression appeared on his face.

On the screen, a ferocious swordsman in black armor was fighting against a graceful woman who wore a light metal armor and an elegant half-mask. Rose petals fell from above, carpeting a grandiose arena. A dark odachi and a slender estoc clashed against each other, filling the air with the clangor of steel.

'Wait. Isn't that… isn't that my duel against Queen Bee?'

That was a memorable fight! He had barely won that one.

Sunny blinked a couple of times, remained silent for a few moments,

and then coughed.

"Uh… hey? I'm back."

Nephis froze. She paused the video, hesitated, then slowly turned and looked at him with a startled expression.

"Oh… hey."

Sunny stared at her for a couple of seconds, then asked with a little smile:

"What are you watching?"

Nephis suddenly livened up and gestured at her communicator.

"That… I stumbled on a video of a very interesting fighter. Have you heard about that guy, Mongrel? He's incredible! I've been watching… uh… studying his fights for a few hours…"

Sunny scratched the back of his head, and then said evenly:

"Mongrel? Yeah, I've heard a few things about him. Incredible, you say? Do tell what is so incredibly about him… in detail…"

Then, he suddenly frowned and sniffed the air.

'What's this smell? Crap, don't tell that the filtration system is glitching…'

Sunny looked around, and then froze.

His eye twitched.

"What… what happened to my projector?!"

A familiar deadpan expression appeared on Neph's face. She glanced in the direction where the expensive model of the projector had used to be, lingered for a moment, and shrugged nonchalantly.

"Oh. A malfunction, I guess. How strange…"

Chapter-785: Solitude

As Sunny bitterly explored the damage done to his entertainment system by the strange… malfunction… Nephis silently watched him from her stool.

"Doesn't make sense… gone, the projector is completely gone... it was so expensive!"

After a while, he turned to Changing Star with a miserable expression and opened his mouth, then frowned in confusion.

"Wait… is that my shirt?"

Neph shifted a little and then said, her voice even:

"I don't have any clothes."

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, then waved a hand and looked away, forgetting what he was going to say.

"Never mind. You can keep it. We can also order a delivery of anything else you need. I am an incredibly rich entrepreneur, you know!"

He paused, then added with a bit of embarrassment:

"Well, I used to be rich, anyway. These days, I pretty much spend everything on… research."

She tilted her head a little, then suddenly said:

"...The girl you're tutoring visited."

'What?!'

Pretending to be nonchalant, Sunny glanced at Nephis and answered

in a neutral tone:

"Oh? Strange. We weren't supposed to have any lessons until a few days from now."

Neph remained silent for a few moments, then looked away with a smile:

"She is a bright kid. I'm glad you are teaching her."

He studied her expression with a frown.

'What's up with that smile?'

Finally, Sunny shrugged.

"Well, money is money. My lessons aren't cheap."

After that, he sighed, threw the destroyed projector out of his mind, and walked into the kitchen.

"Are you hungry? I can cook something up. My culinary skills have improved a lot, you know! As you should have already noticed…"

It was a strange thing. Back on the Forgotten Shore, Nephis had always been the one in charge of feeding the cohort. Now, their roles seemed to have reversed, in more ways than one.

She deactivated her communicator and said neutrally:

"I could eat. Thank you."

Then, Changing Star frowned slightly and added:

"Oh, but I don't have a lot of time. There is a… a consultation with the government psychiatrist I need to attend shortly. By remote, of course."

Sunny stared at her for a while, then shook his head.

'This is so weird…'

Deciding to prepare something that did not demand a lot of time to

make, he took out a pack of ramen, some vegetables, a piece of natural meat, and a pair of eggs.

"I never thought that I would hear something like that from you, of all people. A... psychiatrist, really?"

He started the process of cooking ramen, and added:

"...Was it really that bad?"

Changing Star sighed and looked down. After a while, she suddenly said:

"No. It wasn't too bad."

Her voice sounded distant, and a bit strange.

"In fact, out there in the Dream Realm, I felt…"

Nephis inhaled deeply, and then looked at him somberly:

"...Happy."

Sunny almost dropped the cooking pot. Of all the answers out there, he had not expected to hear that one. Looking at Nephis with an incredulous expression, he asked:

"What? Did you say happy?"

She sighed, and nodded.

"I know that it sounds strange. And yes, traveling through that hell alone was excruciating, terrible, and hard. Many times, I did not think that I would survive. Other times, I wanted to die. There was so much pain, so much hunger, so much thirst. So much cold, so much unbearable heat.

So much… silence."

A wistful expression slowly settled on her face.

"But it was also so... simple. So liberating. All I had to do was walk, fight, kill. Survive. There was no space for unnecessary thoughts.

No burdens I had to carry. No complicated feelings, no responsibility. I did not have to remember where I came from, and where I was headed. I did not have to be a part of… anything. It was just me against the Nightmare Creatures. And the Dream Realm itself."

He listened silently, trying to imagine what living like that would feel like. Well… he didn't have to try too hard. Had he not experienced something similar while living alone in the ruined cathedral of the Dark City? Yes, he had not been entirely himself back then, but…

But he was also the happiest he had ever been, perhaps. There was a bliss in giving up on everything except for the things he needed to survive. Even if the things he was giving up on were his sanity, his future, and his very humanity…

Granted, his isolation had only lasted for several months instead of years, and the environment had not been as dire.

What would have happened to him if he had not abandoned the cathedral to join Changing Star's ill-fated crusade?

She looked down and added evenly:

"I have never felt truly connected to the rest of humanity. I was always… a bit of a stranger, I guess. Out there in the Dream Realm, with only Nightmare Creatures surrounding me, that connection grew even more ethereal. Sometimes, I even felt like everything except for that desolate purgatory had been just a fleeting dream… a strange illusion that I had imagined.

The Dream Realm… it seemed much more real. It seemed like a place where I belonged. With other monsters like me…"

She sighed, then looked at him and added:

"So, that's why I agreed to the offer to receive counseling. It is not because I feel fragile and on the verge of breaking apart. It's just that… I'm afraid to lose what little humanity I have left. I never had a lot, to begin with."

After Neph was done speaking, Sunny stared at her for some time, then shook his head.

'I don't think I have ever heard Neph speak so much…'

Placing ramen in the boiling water, he glanced at her with a frown.

"Well… if you put it like that, I guess a little counseling would do you good. However… I can tell you right now and without a shadow of a doubt that you are not a Nightmare Creature. You're a human through and through. Believe me, I would know."

A pale smile appeared on Changing Star's face.

"Thank you for saying that."

Sunny looked at her with an amused expression, and then smiled:

"I don't think you understand. I am not saying this because I consider you a human, or because I feel like you are a human. Or because I believe that you are a human. It's just a fact."

He pointed to his eye.

"I have special eyes, remember? From that Attribute of mine. I have seen what people look like, and what Nightmare Creatures look like inside."

He peered into Neph's soul and grimaced, almost blinded by the brilliant radiance of five flaming, incandescent suns that burned inside of it. There was no sign of the vile darkness that dwelled in the souls of the corrupted abominations.

Cracking an egg on the edge of the pan, he looked at her and scoffed.

"...You don't look anything like a Nightmare Creature, that's all."

Chapter-786: Lifeline

Soon, two bowls of delicious steaming ramen were on the table in front of them. Sunny had never invited anyone to taste his ramen, but he was quite pleased with the result.

His past of only eating synthpaste seemed so distant that he did not even want to remember it.

Both dug in and finished their portions in record time. Sunny drank the last of the fragrant broth and let out a delighted sigh. Nephis acted more reserved, but he could feel that she was very satisfied, too.

Putting the bowl away, Changing Star smiled slightly and looked at him. A hesitant expression appeared on her face.

A few moments later, she suddenly said:

"Be that as it may… while I was lost and wandering the Dream Realm, slowly forgetting what it felt like to be human… there was one thing I clung to that reminded me that all my prior life had not been just a dream. Do you know what it was?"

Sunny thought for a bit, then shrugged.

"I don't know. A Memory? Your sword, Dreamblade?"

She lingered for a few moments, then slowly shook her head.

"No. It was… you."

Sunny froze and stared at her with surprise.

"Huh?"

Nephis smiled slightly.

"Your runes. Although I could not know what was happening to you, Cassie, and the others, I could still feel connected to you through the runes. I could see that you were still out there, alive, and doing incredible things. The new Memories you received told me a little about what kind of enemies you fought.

The speed at which your Aspect Legacy progressed told me how hard you were working to sharpen your battle skill. As long as I saw the runes, I knew that I had not imagined the past... and did not feel as alone."

She shifted, and then added:

"When I was bored, I liked to imagine what exactly happened to give you a sudden influx of fragments, what the Nightmare Creature that gifted you a Memory looked like, how you defeated it. Things… things like that. Oh… and I was bored often. While my journey was often full of hardship and dread, it could also be terribly monotonous sometimes.

So… that was pretty much the only way I could entertain myself."

Changing Star looked at him, lingered for a moment, and then said:

"I know it was not really something that you did consciously. Still. I wanted to say… thank you. You helped me a lot, Sunny. You made it easier for me to keep going. I won't forget that."

He stared at her, suddenly uncomfortable. Then, he looked away in embarrassment and cleared his throat.

"Are... are you sure that you have not received counseling already? I mean, that doesn't sound like you. Very… uh… enlightened. Anyway… you're welcome, I guess."

Nephis smiled, and did not respond.

Sunny remained silent for a bit, and then forced himself to say:

"...Actually, I spent a lot of time staring at your runes, as well."

He looked at the floor.

"Granted, I was not exactly going crazy from isolation like you. Well… except for a short stretch of falling into a bottomless abyss all alone, I guess. But, the point is… to be honest, I was... I am... unsatisfied with the fact that you are so far ahead of me. Every time you gained a soul fragment, it urged me to try and get two.

The stronger you grew, the more I wanted to become stronger, as well. A large part of those things I gained… was because of you. I guess you, too, kept me going. In a sense."

He fell silent, and then glanced at Nephis with a slightly bitter expression:

"Of course, no matter how hard I tried, I had never managed to catch up to you. Every time, I fell short. It did not feel nice at all. But it also forced me to try harder, I guess."

She studied his face for a few moments, and then shook her head.

"It is much easier for me to gain soul fragments. You know that. Even though I am still ahead, I suspect that you have fought, and slain, many more Nightmare Creatures than I have. In fact, I know you did."

Sunny smiled.

"Who cares? It's not a competition where you get rewarded for the effort. Only the result matters. In the end, a person is either strong, or they are weak. The stronger ones will always trample those who are weaker. Isn't that how the world works?"

Nephis looked down, then slowly shook her head.

"You are wrong. I think. Results matter, yes… but it's not like how you got there doesn't. Every victory you achieve teaches you a lesson. Every defeat you suffer teaches you even more. I guess it all depends on what you call strength."

Sunny grimaced.

"Well, let me ask you a question. Can you say that I am stronger than you?"

Changing Star stared at him with an even expression. Several seconds passed by, but she remained silent.

A dark grin appeared on Sunny's face. He sighed, and then collected the empty bowls to clean them.

"Effie doesn't seem to think that I am. According to her, I lack conviction. I don't even really know what conviction is and where does one find it, but even I can't honestly say that I am stronger than you. That should tell you something, considering... you know, my clear conscience."

Nephis lingered for a few moments, and then suddenly said in calm tone:

"You are stronger than you think you are."

Sunny put the bowls into the sink and turned on the water.

Standing with his back to her, he stayed quiet for a while. After some time, he started to wash the dishes and said:

"...Your counseling session is about to start. You should hurry."

She looked at his back for a few moments, then silently stood up and went away.

Sunny was left alone in the kitchen. He finished washing the bowls, put them on the drying rack, and wiped his hands with a towel.

Then, he glanced in the direction of the guest room, shook his head, and scoffed.

"Ah, who cares? Apparently, I am incredible…"

Chapter-787: Training Session

A week later, two people sat across from each other on the cold floor of the underground dojo, their eyes closed. With their legs crossed and their hands resting on their laps, it seemed as though they were meditating.

Of course, they weren't.

While Sunny was calm and relaxed, Nephis was the opposite. There was a furious torrent of soul energy flowing through her body, making it hard for her to remain still. Invisible to anyone except for her partner, radiant streams of ethereal essence rushed through her veins like rivers of flame.

Her breathing was uneven, and there were beads of sweat on her face.

Sunny observed Changing Star through his shadows. After a while, he said:

"You are doing much better. While crude, your control is already stable. However, there is no precision to it… a Master has to be intricate in how they apply and expend their essence. That is what truly separates us from the Awakened. While the soul of an Ascended is more potent, the gap is not too large.

It is our ability to make better use of this potential that really separates us from the rest of them."

Neph was doing well. In fact, her rapid progress in learning how to control her essence was nothing short of exceptional. However, she was facing substantial obstacles in her training. Not only was Changing Star completely new to that aspect of her power, she also simply had too much soul essence. Compared to normal Master, she had at least five times as much of it.

If most Ascended contained a tranquil current of essence within their bodies, Nephis contained a furious sea.

Her soul essence was also different from anything Sunny had ever faced. It was much more potent, fiery, and vibrant, probably because of [The Fire] Attribute she had inherited from her mother.

What it effectively meant was that Neph would have to put much more effort into learning to control her essence. However, once she did climb over that steep obstacle… the result was going to be simply terrifying.

Showing her the way put Sunny's own experiences in perspective, gifting him a few new insights of his own. Just as it had been with Rain, the role of a mentor allowed him to learn a lot himself.

Teaching was truly the best way to learn.

Now, Sunny felt that his own essence control was far more precise and nuanced than that of most, even without the help of Soul Serpent.

…Of course, he had no chance to test it in actual combat yet. He was also growing more and more sour about the fact that both Blood Weave and Bone Weave were purely corporeal in nature. Although shadow essence was unique, it did not receive any augmentation from his Attributes.

In fact, the only time its strange nature played a role had been during his encounter with the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn. Even though that single instance had saved his life, Sunny really wished for more.

'Maybe I am not utilizing its full potential…'

If there was a way to do so, however, he had no idea how. Maybe if Weaver's lineage had not devoured the Shadow God's, Sunny would have been in a different situation. As it stood, though…

'I wonder if there is a Soul Weave…'

Nephis sighed, and opened her eyes. The turbulent flow of soul essence in her body settled, returning to a calmer cycle. She rested

for a moment, and then rose to her feet.

Sunny did the same, commanding the four shadows to wrap themselves around his body.

"Are you ready?"

She nodded, and then exploded in motion, attacking him with her fists.

Empowered by the shadows, Sunny easily dodged, deflected, and blocked the torrent of devastating punches and kicks. This was the second part of their training — Nephis not only had to learn how to control soul essence, but also how to use it in battle. She had to retrain herself from the ground up to account for all the new possibilities that the Ascension granted her.

This was not an easy task, considering that the difference went much deeper than simple physical ability and explosive might. At their high level, combat became much more tactical. Soul essence was a precious resource that could achieve a lot, but was also easily wasted. A Master had to be strategic in how they unleashed their powers.

Their physical performance, Aspect, and Memories could all benefit from vast amounts of essence. However, they could also quickly deplete it. The same statement held true for Awakened, but to a much lesser degree, since Masters had much greater powers at their disposal… and thus could exert much greater volumes of soul essence.

It was a constant and complicated dance that required a lot of skill, foresight, and cunning to be performed to the best result.

Sunny himself still had a lot to learn.

Serving as a bona fide punching bag for Nephis was not the most efficient way of learning, but it had its own merits. By dedicating himself to nothing but withstanding a constant barrage of attacks and rationing his essence in the most efficient way, Sunny was teaching himself how to prepare for long battles of attrition.

…At least she had mastered essence control enough to not ruin the

dojo!

For a while, the underground chamber was filled with nothing but the sounds of heavy breathing and flesh hitting flesh. Both fighters were exerting themselves to the utmost degree. Sunny had it easier since he was defending, but receiving so many crushing blows in a row was still not for the weak of heart.

Each of Neph's essence-empowered strikes could have punched through an armored vehicle, after all. If not for the fact that she was not using her flames to augment herself, Sunny would have been suffering from internal bleeding by now. Having nearly indestructible bones was a big advantage, but it did not make him invincible.

Their furious clash lasted until Nephis exhausted most of her essence. Determined to launch one last attack, she stepped closer. Her slender leg whipped forward, threatening to crush Sunny's ribcage. He swiftly turned and caught it in the air, then gently placed it on the ground.

"That… that's enough for today."

Since this had been their routine for the entirety of the last week, neither said another word. Both fell to the floor, spent and utterly exhausted. Their breathing was hoarse, and their clothes were soaked with sweat.

'Damn… I need a shower…'

However, the idea of standing up seemed too cruel right now. Sunny turned his head to glance at Nephis and judged that she was in an even more pitiful state. So, they simply remained on the floor for a few minutes, laying side by side and trying to catch their breath.

After a while, Sunny's communicator suddenly made a sound.

Of course, it was not on his person. A clash of such intensity would have quickly destroyed the expensive device, so Sunny had left it on the lid of the Dreamscape pod. Now, he faced the necessity to walk all the way to the alcove to retrieve it.

Instead, Sunny commanded the happy shadow to glide there, turn tangible, pick up the communicator and bring it back. The fool was

utterly delighted to oblige, anyway…

As the shadow gingerly crossed the underground dojo and presented the communicator to Sunny, he glanced at the screen, and then sighed.

"Time to go, Neph. Cassie is on her way…"

Chapter-788: Cordial Invitation

Sunny took a quick shower and went downstairs. By the time he came down, Nephis was just exiting the guest room. She changed from the gym shorts and a tank top that she had been wearing for their practice session and put on some of the clothes they had ordered for her a few days back. Her silver hair was wet, glistening in the rays of sunshine that poured through the windows.

Without having to say anything, Sunny went to the kitchen, opened a drawer, and took out a can of grounded coffee. Then, he stretched his arm back. By then, Nephis had already filled a pot with water and placed it into his hand. Soon, the pleasant aroma spread through the house.

By the time the coffee was ready, a PTV was in the process of parking nearby. Sunny dumped two spoons of sugar into his cup, left the one intended for Neph without any, and added cream to the third. Changing Star, meanwhile, was opening the door for Cassie.

Soon, all three were seated around the table, enjoying their respective beverages. After a while, Sunny glanced at the blind girl and asked:

"Well? What's the news?"

She lingered for a bit, then pushed her cup away and produced two flat, white squares. Sunny stared at them for a bit, confused. Then, he blinked a couple of times.

"Is that… an envelope?"

Indeed, that was what the white squares were. They seemed to be made out of paper, and each had a round piece of red wax attached to it. Sunny had only seen an actual paper envelope used in period dramas, so he was justifiably surprised to encounter one in real life.

Taking one of the envelopes, he curiously studied it from different sides.

"How quaint…"

There was an image of a sword piercing an anvil etched into the red wax, so at least he did not have to wonder where the strange things had come from.

'Legacies…'

Amused, he furtively glanced at Nephis to learn what one was supposed to do with a paper envelope, and then repeated her actions. Soon, a different piece of paper appeared in his hands.

"Master Sunless, you are cordially invited… what? What is this?"

Even more confused than before, he turned to Cassie and raised an eyebrow. She was supposed to bring them an update on the situation with the government and Clan Valor, not some weird messages.

The blind girl smiled slightly.

"Basically, this is a gesture of good will."

She paused for a moment, and then added in a bright tone:

"It is an invitation. Clan Valor is holding an annual ball in about a month. We are all invited to attend… which is usually considered a great honor. Not every Master receives the privilege to brush sides with the most powerful representatives of the great clans and actual Saints."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"...Is holding balls some weird Legacy ceremony? Wait, what kinds of ball are we talking about? Something like a football? Why do people hold it annually, and more importantly, why do we have to attend this… ball holding ritual?"

Nephis silently covered her face with a hand and said, a hint of exasperation finding its way into her voice:

"Sunny… a ball is a social gathering, usually accompanied by a dance. It is not a literal ball!"

He stared at her for a moment, then glanced at the piece of paper in his hand and coughed.

"Oh… that makes more sense, I guess…"

Cassie listened to them speak with a strange expression, then tilted her head a little and said:

"...Of course, in our case, this invitation holds special meaning. It is a sign that Clan Valor is willing to be patient and wait for Nephis to recover. It is also the indication that the final negotiation is going to take place during the ball, one month from now. This gives us time to prepare."

This was a good piece of news, all things considered. Basically, it meant that now that the initial week was over, Changing Star had more time to get ready to face the representatives of Clan Valor. It also meant that the great clan was not going to do anything before that, giving her freedom to recuperate in peace. It was more or less an armistice.

A bright smile appeared on Cassie's delicate face.

"But there is more! To show their sincerity, Clan Valor released the Fire Keepers they were holding hostage. Both are already back, and resting in the Immortal Flame manor. This… this means that they are serious about building a good relationship with us, I think."

Sunny let out a sigh.

He was not really attached to the Fire Keepers. Still, they had gone through the civil war in the Bright Castle and the siege of the Crimson Spire together. The fools also treated him as one of their own, for some reason. He had felt a bit guilty knowing that some of them were suffering because of the terrible mess in the Night Temple.

Effie, Kai, and Aiko were going to be very happy to hear the news, too.

However... it was not like Clan Valor to let go of leverage. Sunny glanced at Cassie and frowned.

"What are they scheming?"

The blind girl hesitated for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I am not entirely sure. However… I do have a suspicion. This sudden change must indicate that something important happened to shift the balance of power even more in favor of Clan Song. That is why Valor is willing to make concessions to ensure that Immortal Flame becomes their ally."

Sunny suddenly felt a strong sense of unease. What could have happened to change the power dynamic between the two great clans so much?

He took a sip of his coffee, and then asked.

"Well… so what now?"

Cassie smiled.

"Now? Now, we are free to do anything we want for a month. The government is going to insist that Nephis makes at least one public appearance, but they won't be too forceful in their demands. So… we can do whatever."

She turned to Changing Star and said, her voice full of warmth:

"Neph… how do you feel about finally coming home? We can go to the manor right now. If you're ready..."

Chapter-789: Only Forward

Nephis looked in the window and remained silent for a while. Her face was distant and still. After a while, she lightly shook her head.

"No… not yet."

Cassie seemed to be surprised by that answer.

"No? But… why?"

Changing Star sighed.

"The… Fire Keepers. That is what people call the Awakened who follow you, right? They all look up to me, do they not?"

The blind girl silently nodded.

"Of course! We… they have been waiting for your return ever since escaping the Forgotten Shore. Even though the Dreamer Army was an alliance of convenience, the bonds that were forged between its members are real. Their bond to you is real, too."

Sunny sipped his coffee with a strange expression. Neph, meanwhile, lingered for a moment, and then said:

"But they want more than just to welcome me back. They expect me to lead them, like I did on the Forgotten Shore. Am I correct?"

Cassie nodded once again.

Neph looked away.

"How can I lead them when I don't know where I am going? I… I need more time to figure things out before I face them."

The blind girl remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"I… I understand. I think."

…Sunny, meanwhile, did not understand.

Sure, on the surface, what Nephis said made perfect sense. She was not sure of what she was going to do, so she could not offer the remnants of the Dreamer Army guidance. She could not become their general again until she decided on the direction her soldiers had to follow.

However, Sunny harbored doubts about the sincerity of this indecision. Nephis had never been one to allow her hesitation to slow her down. More than that, she had spent two whole years alone in the Dream Realm… if he knew anything about her, he knew that she must have dedicated a considerable amount of that time to obsessively making plans of how to destroy her enemies once she returned.

Of course, there was a lot of new information that became available to Neph after she came back. That had to change her approach a little, but should not have affected the core of it. So why was she hesitating?

What was she struggling with?

Sunny did not know, and was not sure that he wanted to know… yet. In any case, he was going to learn sooner or later.

There was something else that bothered him, though…

He glanced at Nephis and Cassie and then said, his voice grumpy:

"Aren't you two forgetting something? This is still my home! We only agreed that Nephis would stay here for a week. Shouldn't you at least ask me before deciding to leave her here for a while longer?"

He was not going to let Changing Star pull off an Effie that easily!

Neph turned and looked at him with an unreadable expression. After a few moments of silence, she asked:

"Sunny, do you mind if I stay for a couple more weeks?"

He coughed, and then glanced away in embarrassment.

"Of course! Sure, no problem. Glad to have you, and all that. See, was that so hard?"

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Cassie remained for a bit longer to get Nephis up to speed about the state of the Fire Keepers and the renovations they were making to the Immortal Flame manor, and then left. Running a prominent Awakened organization was not an easy task, so she had a lot on her plate.

Sunny and Neph were left alone again.

He hesitated for a few moments, and then asked:

"Do you really not want to go home? I mean… I never really had one, more or less, before buying this house. But if I did, I imagine I would have missed it a lot."

Nephis glanced at him, then slowly shook her head.

"That place is not really my home. We were moving a lot while I was growing up. Sometimes because our financial situation changed, sometimes due to security issues. That manor is just the last in a long series of temporary shelters."

She remained silent for a few moments, then added:

"I guess it was the people who surrounded me that created the feeling of home. But they are all gone now, one way or the other. So, there's nothing for me to return to."

Sunny sighed, remembering the conversation he once had with Noctis.

"I don't really understand what the Immortal Flame clan is, to be honest. And who those people were. You once said that you were raised by your grandmother?"

Changing Star nodded.

"The Immortal Flame… is just me, now. At its height, it was one of the most influential Legacy clans. You could have called it a great clan, even, although that distinction was not established yet back then. Apart from the immediate family, the clan also encompassed hundreds of other people.

Professionals to manage our properties, craftsmen, mundane soldiers, Awakened retainers, their dependents… a Legacy clan is more than just a few powerful warriors. It is a… a large, self-sufficient institution. A tribe, even."

She grew silent, and then said:

"Of course, our fortunes turned after Immortal Flame himself died, and my mother became Hollow. Then my father was gone, too. Only my grandmother remained to take care of me. She was not an Awakened… however, don't think that she was weak because of it. On the contrary, although my grandmother was a mundane human, she was also the strongest person I've ever known."

Nephis looked away, a hint of emotion appearing on her face.

"She was a member of the First Generation. She was born during the darkest times of humanity, survived the bloody descent of the Spell and the final convulsions of the old world order, then participated in the establishment of the new one. She was strong. She was also wise, and kind. I couldn't wish for a better guardian."

She looked down.

"However, she was not enough to keep the Immortal Flame Clan from falling, especially not when we found ourselves in the crosshairs of my father's former companions. Slowly but surely, we lost our assets and our standing. Some of the people in our employ left of their own free will, others were forced to abandon us because of adversity. Many of those who remained died trying to protect me.

The most loyal ones still persisted… there were several Awakened among them, and even a Master. My mentor."

Nephis sighed.

"But in the end, he was gone, too. By the time I turned sixteen, all that remained were a few mundane servants who had been with us for so long that they had nowhere else to go. After my grandmother passed away and I felt the call of the Nightmare Spell, I paid them a generous stipend from what little funds the clan had left, and let them go. You know the rest."

Changing Star remained silent for a while, and then added:

"...I remember walking through the manor before leaving it to comply with the Third Directive and surrender myself to the police. It was so strange, seeing it completely empty. My grandmother was gone. My mother was in the care facility. The servants had left. It was just me, alone."

She looked away. Suddenly, a pale smile appeared on her face.

"Nothing held me back. So, I wasn't sad to leave at all. There was only one direction left for me… forward…"

Sunny looked at her silently, a somber expression hidden in the depths of his eyes.

Only forward... that was true for the both of them, still.

However, was it worth it to not be held back by anything, if in return you had nothing to hold dear?

Turning away, he sighed.

Life was not that simple anymore...

Chapter-790: Outing

Despite the fact that Nephis had decided to stay with Sunny for a couple more weeks… or rather, that he had allowed her stay!... their routine somewhat changed. Because of the armistice with Clan Valor, she did not have to stay inside all the time anymore. So, while the two of them still continued having exhausting practice sessions every day, the intensity of the training diminished.

On the first day after receiving the invitation to the ball, Nephis had left to visit her mother. Soon after that, she made a strange request.

The counselor assigned to Neph by the government had suggested that she should not isolate herself from mundane humans and, instead, seek out opportunities to participate in collective activities people usually enjoyed. So, she asked Sunny to help her figure out what it was that people did with their free time.

Sunny was glad to help.

The problem was... he had no idea himself. His life experience was richer than hers, but the knowledge of how people lived their lives in the outskirts did not exactly apply to their situation. After becoming a citizen and moving to a better part of the city, Sunny had spent all his time doing more productive things than… relaxing.

Who had time to relax? There were so many things he needed to achieve!

As the result, they had to turn to other members of the cohort for advice. When they did, Effie enthusiastically volunteered to arrange an outing. Although Sunny had a bad premonition about her proposal, he found no polite reason to refuse the giddy huntress.

So, a few days later, he found himself doing something that he had never thought he would ever do…

Sunny was getting ready to go to a dance club.

'What am I even doing? This… this is so stupid…'

Standing in front of the mirror, he somberly looked at the pale young man that stared back at him. The young man was dressed in stylishly understated clothes that mixed black with different shades of dark grey. He was… undeniably attractive, although not exactly masculine in appearance. The attractive young man, of course, was him.

Or his reflection, rather.

Sunny studied it and frowned.

'Whatever… it's just a nightclub. I have fought Saints and survived. I have conquered the Red Colosseum. I have faced a daemon! How scary can a bunch of drunk mundanes be?'

Shaking his head, he let out a heavy sigh and went down to the living room.

As he sat and waited with a dark expression on his face, an expensive PTV arrived and parked near the house. At that moment, Effie and Neph emerged from one of the smaller bedrooms on the second floor and started descending the stairs.

"Finally! What took you so…"

He turned and froze, unable to finish his thought.

Standing on the polished steps, Neph looked… different.

Although she was famous across the world, most people only knew her by name. Very few had actually seen the renowned Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan — mostly because she had yet to appear in public after her return from the Dream Realm. However, it was still prudent to mask some of her more recognizable features to avoid being mobbed by an excited crowd.

For that reason, Sunny had lent her the Autumn Leaf. Using the cosmetic Memory, Nephis changed the color of her distinct silver hair.

Now, her hair was black and lustrous, falling to the middle of her back like a waterfall of finest silk. Contrasted against it, her calm grey eyes seemed even more striking. Her ivory skin seemed to glow despite the fact that she was not channeling the radiant white flames.

What was more… Effie had been the one who chose and bought the clothes for the two of them to wear today. As the result, Nephis was wearing a vibrant red dress that barely reached the middle of her thigh, and left her shoulders bare.

She looked… stunning.

Sunny gulped, then forced himself to look away. A few moments later, he finally was able to say something:

"That… uh… never thought I'd see you in a dress... one day."

Nephis glanced at herself, then shrugged with indifference.

"I like it. The style does not diminish my range of motion. I can move freely if something happens."

Sunny hesitated and then glanced at Effie — who was wearing less flashy clothes — with suspicion.

"...How come you get to wear pants?"

Effie grinned.

"Why else? That's because I'm not a princess, doofus!"

She giggled, and then did a spin.

"What, you don't you think that my ensemble is flattering?"

It… was. Maybe even too much so!

Not knowing where to put his eyes, Sunny gritted his teeth and forced himself to stare at the wall.

'This is going to be… a long night…'

He cleared his throat, and then said:

"Yeah... you look nice, too. Anyway, we should go. Our ride is already here."

Effie giggled again, patted him on the shoulder, and headed for the door. Sunny and Nephis followed.

Soon, they entered the PTV and greeted the others. After seeing Kai, Sunny's mood improved a bit. At least the former idol seemed to be in his element…

Cassie, on the other hand, seemed uneasy. Well, no wonder. A club filled with thundering music was not the best environment for a beautiful, blind girl to be in. Of course, anyone who got the wrong idea was bound to learn that they made a giant mistake by approaching her with ill intent.

Kai smiled at him from the driver's seat.

"Sunny, you look great!"

Then, he turned to Nephis and Effie and smiled even wider, almost blinding them with his dazzling grin.

"...But not as great as the ladies do, of course!"

Sunny rolled his eyes.

"Just drive, alright? Let's get this finished with as soon as possible."

Kai winked at him, then looked at the road and sent the PTV forward.

"Relax, Sunny. It's just a dance club. What's the worst that could happen?"

Sunny and the gloomy shadow simultaneously shuddered.

"Are you kidding me?! Did you have to say that out loud?!"

Chapter-791: Human Rituals

Standing at the edge of the VIP area that loomed above the dance floor of a popular nightclub, Sunny and Nephis looked down at the undulating mass of human bodies below them with strange expressions. The music thundered and reverberated from all sides, making the whole space vibrate. The darkness was filled with flashes of light and glowing figures of elaborate moving projections.

People were having the time of their lives.

The club Effie had brought them to was an exclusive and luxurious establishment that only the members of the elite classes of human society could visit.

The amount of credits being spent every minute on exotic alcoholic beverages and legal stimulants was nothing short of astronomical. The value of designer clothes, cutting-edge tech accessories, and precious jewelry present in the dance hall was almost revolting. The bestial excitement permeating the air was almost palpable.

Staring at the mass of dancing humans in bewilderment, Sunny shook his head.

"What a… strange ritual."

Nephis turned her head slightly and raised an eyebrow.

"...I know, right?"

The members of the cohort were occupying a large part of the VIP lounge intended for the most distinguished patrons of the club. Even among the mass of elites, their status was a cut above the rest. Kai and Cassie were enjoying something called champagne at the table, while the other three moved to the edge to take a look at the main hall of the club.

Changing Star peered at the dancing crowd and frowned.

"Their behavior doesn't make any sense."

Sunny nodded in solidarity.

"Indeed."

After a while, he added:

"They're not even dancing, they're just… rhythmically gyrating their bodies. It also appears that the proximity at which one is allowed to gyrate his or her body to other participants is representative of their… desirability? Anyway, they all look incredibly stupid."

Nephis tilted her head a little.

"It is not that simple, I think. This strange dynamic actually seems to be very nuanced. Just look at the women… they seem to be using their looks, physical coordination, and agility in order to attract the men. However, once men are attracted, the women act as if they are disinterested. Most of the time they truly are, other times it is just a signal for the men to try harder."

She grew silent, and then added with slight confusion:

"The most startling part is that all this information, including the complicated evaluations based on obscure parameters and much more, is communicated absolutely non-verbally and in a way that both men and women somehow seem to understand while chaotically jerking their bodies. It is like they all developed telepathic abilities."

Sunny scowled.

"Anyway, these gyrations are clearly meant to illustrate one's high value as a romantic partner. And that is what this "dance" is, a venue for the "dancers" to seek out physically desirable partners. However, everyone acts as if it's not. In fact, most of these people are pretending that the exact opposite is true."

He rubbed his chin.

"As if showing interest is in itself an admission of inadequacy and undesirability. Those who do manage to find partners do it through a series of obscure hints and silent signals. This is so... inefficient. Why can't people just honestly state their goals and desires? They are all pursuing the same result, anyway."

Changing Star nodded thoughtfully.

…Effie, who was leaning on the railing near them, stared at the two of them with a perplexed expression. Then, the huntress slowly shook her head.

"You are both idiots, you know that?"

Sunny and Nephis looked at her with surprise, their movement almost simultaneous.

"What?"

"Why? Is this analysis wrong?"

Effie let out an exasperated sigh.

"They are just having fun! Gods, don't you know what fun is? Believe it or not, it's just pleasurable to let loose and move your body to loud music sometimes. Actually, you should try it!"

A very similar expression of subdued revulsion appeared on both of their faces.

"No, thank you."

"I'd rather not!"

The huntress rolled her eyes.

"As for that stuff about seeking partners, what's wrong with that? Other things can be pleasurable too, you know…"

Both Sunny and Nephis blinked.

"...How frivolous."

"Of course, I do! Don't I know it well!"

Effie groaned and grabbed her head.

"Hopeless… both of them…"

After a few moments, she sighed, then looked at Nephis and asked:

"Well, anyway. This is a perfect example of what humans like to do. Is it working? Do you feel better connected to humanity?"

Changing Star hesitated, then looked back at the mass of dancing people and remained silent for a while. Then, she said:

"It is strange. To see so many people, acting so… carelessly. To be honest, all I can think about…"

Her face turned somber. Nephis lingered for a moment as she studied the crowd with a dark expression.

"...Is how easy it would be to kill them all. They are just so unaware, and unprepared."

After long years of living in a state of constant pain and struggle, desperately trying to survive and fighting harrowing enemies almost every day, it must have been hard for her to come to terms with this strange, peaceful reality. Neph might have returned to the waking world, but her mentality was slow to adjust. It was still in the dreadful grasp of the Dream Realm.

Mentally, Changing Star was still living in a nightmare.

Effie looked at her with a dubious frown.

"You would be surprised. This is an expensive club, so a lot of these people are Awakened. In fact, I'd say that places like these have a higher concentration of Awakened than pretty much anywhere else in the city, except for the Academy. This club is better suited to resist a sudden Gate manifestation than the headquarters of most Legacy clans."

Neph glanced at her with surprise.

"Really?"

The huntress grinned.

"Of course! Not all Awakened are obsessed with fighting like the two of you. They treat the Dream Realm as their job, not their whole existence. While they sleep, they perform their duties — man the walls, fight the attacking Nightmare Creatures, maintain their Citadels, and so on. When they wake up, they go about their actual lives."

Chapter-792: Blind Spot

Effie smiled, then gestured at the dancing crowd and added:

"After they return from the Dream Realm, most Awakened spend at least a part of their day training to raise their usefulness to the Citadel and increase their chances of survival. Some have important jobs to perform in the waking world, as well. Our infrastructure runs on spelltech, after all."

She shook her head.

"But other than that, there's plenty of time to live and have fun. It doesn't have to be all work, without stop… some might even say that not having any other interests is detrimental."

The huntress looked at them and shrugged.

"I mean, how can you be motivated to fight for this world if you never experience all the nice things that it has to offer? Maybe that is why your counselor told you to participate in mundane human activities, Neph. Awakened and especially Masters like us need to anchor ourselves to humanity, somehow. But there's no Gateways here."

Sunny took a sniff of the strange sparkling liquid in his glass, then carefully tasted it. This champagne, or whatever it was called, was way too expensive for him to pass the chance of getting his money's worth out of it. Well… he wasn't paying today, but still. It was a matter of principle!

Of course, Sunny had sworn off alcohol, but with him being a Master now, there was no way for him to get drunk unless he wanted to. Not because of mundane drinks like this one, anyway. Unless he consciously willed otherwise, his body was going to treat alcohol as a weak poison and resist it.

'Tastes… sweet. But also bitter. Very refreshing, though. How strange!'

Effie's words made him thoughtful. She was not entirely wrong… Sunny himself felt a bit ambivalent about the waking world, which had not been kind to him in the past. He only liked it better than the Dream Realm because it was safer and had nice things, like delicious food, comfortable furniture, and network dramas.

Also, Rain was here.

But what if an Awakened was indifferent to all those things? Would they even feel compelled to do anything to protect the waking world? What was going to stop them from abandoning the mundane completely after they became a Master or a Saint?

Or a Sovereign?

Nephis, meanwhile, continued to study the dance hall. After a while, she said:

"There might be many Awakened here, but how prepared are they to fight against a flood of Nightmare Creatures? It takes a lot of courage to face an opening Gate. Out of those who are courageous, how many are competent enough to make a difference? Not everyone is like Mongrel. Very few can stand their ground and fight."

Effie gave her a strange look.

"Huh? Have you been watching a lot of videos on the network, princess? You are quoting Mongrel now?"

Changing Star shrugged.

"I just find him admirable."

The huntress suddenly grinned and said in a conspiratorial tone:

"Neph… do you maybe have a crush on Lord Mongrel?"

Sunny almost spat out his champagne. He turned slightly and threw a murderous glance at Effie.

Nephis, however, remained nonchalant. She showed no reaction, and simply said:

"I just appreciate his skill and his integrity. At first, I was merely attracted by how beautiful his swordsmanship is. Flowing, unpredictable. Supremely adaptable. I watched a few of his duels, as well as his performances in the Dream Tournament. His dedication, versatility, and...

domineering attitude... left a deep impression on me."

Changing Star shook her head.

"But those were just games. It was only when I stumbled on a clip of Mongrel single-handedly stalling several waves of Nightmare Creatures in front of a Gate that I truly grew to appreciate his character. In my opinion, he is what a true Awakened should strive to be. Someone who is not resigned to bowing down to the Spell, and is determined to resist it instead.

His will, mastery of combat, and wisdom are commendable. It warms my heart to know that there are warriors like him out there."

Sunny gripped his glass and forced out an awkward smile:

"Hey… let's not go overboard about that Mongrel guy, shall we? He's not that great. I mean, he was not really alone at that Gate, there were other Awakened helping him. As for all that wisdom stuff, I am willing to bet that he did not mean any of the crap he said…"

Nephis looked at him with surprise.

"I disagree. I think that Mongrel deserves all the praise. He is truly remarkable!"

Effie, meanwhile, was looking at them with a grin.

Sunny suddenly got a bad feeling.

Before he could say something, however, the huntress leaned forward and whispered into Neph's ear:

"You do know that Sunny is Mongrel, right?"

Sunny choked on his champagne. The exquisite glass cracked slightly in his hand.

Nephis froze.

Her face remained still as ever. However, despite the dim lighting of the night club, he could swear there was a hint of pink slowly appearing on her cheeks. Was she... blushing?

'Damned Effie! I'll kill her!'

Changing Star remained silent for a while, then said in her usual even tone:

"...Of course. I definitely knew that."

She straightened her back, and then added:

"I was just commenting on his perceived accomplishments. Now, if you'll excuse me… I need to visit the restroom."

She glanced at Sunny and Effie with a deadpan expression, then turned around and walked away. Her pace was calm and steady. Not rushed at all.

Effie waited for a few moments, then threw her head back and exploded in laughter.

"Oh, gods… "doesn't make any sense", "so inefficient"… I can't with these two!"

Sunny glared at her with murder in his eyes. He remained silent for a few moments, then said softly:

"Hey, Effie?"

She looked at him with a wide grin.

"What, doofus?"

He sighed, then rotated his shoulders a few times.

"Do you have a will?"

The huntress blinked a couple of times.

"Sure. I made one before the Second Nightmare. Why?"

Sunny looked at her and smiled politely.

"Oh, no reason. No reason at all…"

Chapter-793: Memories of the Future

Effie wisely chose that moment to disappear and join the dancing crowd below. Sunny ground his teeth for a few moments, then shook his head and walked to the table, landing on a luxurious lounge chair with a sigh.

Kai briefly glanced at him and smiled.

"Where are Effie and Lady Nephis?"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then looked away.

"Effie went to dance. Neph is in the bathroom. Also, will you cut it out with the "lady" stuff? The two of you spent months traversing the Forgotten Shore together, back when we were returning from the Hollow Mountains. She is also younger than you. That is more than enough to drop the formalities, don't you think?"

The archer coughed.

"Oh. Well… I'll try."

He didn't sound very convincing, forcing Sunny to roll his eyes.

"Anyway, what do we have here?"

At some point, a waiter had entered the lounge and placed a tray of various foods on the table... while trying very hard not to throw reverent looks at the distinguished guests. Knowing that there would be no chance for him to taste anything once Effie returned, Sunny used the opportunity to try a few.

As he chewed on a piece of cheese that had been dipped into a sweet,

viscous amber liquid, Sunny smiled in delight and asked:

"Wow. What's that sugary syrup?"

Cassie turned to him, then smelled the air.

"I... I think it's honey."

Sunny blinked a couple of times. The word was familiar, but he usually heard it used as a term of endearment. Who knew that it had actually come from something this delicious?

"What is honey, though?"

The blind girl tilted her head a little, then said with a bit of surprise in her voice:

"Well, it is... a sort of liquid that special insects produce by ingesting and regurgitating floral nectar. I guess."

Sunny froze, grew a little pale, and slowly pushed the cheese plate away from himself.

"...I see. I see. Good to know."

With that, he gulped a mouthful of champagne and tried to discreetly rinse his mouth.

Sunny was never picky about his food. He had even sustained himself on raw, rotting mimic meat for an entire month once.

But even he had his limits!

'Damned rich people… what are they going to come up with next?!'

Soon, Nephis returned. She was acting as if nothing had happened, and her face was perfectly composed. However, there was a hint of confusion in her eyes.

As she sat down, Kai hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"You seem concerned. Did anything happen… uh… Nephis?

Changing Star paid no attention to the lack of "lady" and simply shook her head.

"Nothing. I just overheard a bit of a strange conversation on my way back. Apparently, there is a little snack here in the VIP lounge that those women would want to taste? Odd. Why wouldn't they just order it themselves... well, maybe it is not on the common menu?"

Sunny glanced at the small bowl of honey with disgust and sneered.

"If they want it, they can have it. I have no objections. They are free to gobble it up, as far as I'm concerned."

Ignoring a strange glance from Kai, Sunny took a sip of champagne and relaxed a little. That was the point of today's outing, anyway. After days of serving as a punching bag for an untrained Master, he deserved some rest…

Soon enough, Effie returned. The huntress was practically beaming with delight. She quickly destroyed most of their food, poured herself a drink, and grinned.

"This is fun! We should go out more often!"

Sunny and Nephis looked at her in horror, while Kai nodded.

"Indeed. It's just a shame that they don't have live music…"

Effie, meanwhile, looked around with a bit of curious expression.

"...This is strange, though. I never imagined living like this. I mean, my goal was always to become a Master. But now that I did, everything seems a little surreal."

The archer smiled wistfully.

"Yes… life is full of surprises, isn't it? Before the Forgotten Shore, I had a clear picture of what my future would look like. Then, for years, I tried not to think about the future at all. And now that I reached that future, it's not like what I thought it would be. Not even a little bit."

Cassie let out a small sigh.

"Me too. When I look back on my younger self and think about what she expected from the future, I… I can't believe how naive and shortsighted she was. She... feels like a stranger."

A few gazes fell on Sunny. He raised his eyebrow, and then said:

"What? This is exactly how I imagined my life would go, actually. After I returned from the First Nightmare, I thought that I would soon be a full citizen, super rich, and have unlimited access to tasty food. So I don't know what you're talking about. For me, everything went according to plan!"

Effie rolled her eyes, and then glanced at Nephis.

"What about you, princess?"

Changing Star lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

"I am exactly where I expected to be, too. Of course, the details are different. But the result is the same. Legacies don't really have a choice in these matters."

Sunny suddenly became curious.

"I heard that all children of Legacy clans are inevitably infected by the Nightmare Spell. There is just no chance for them to remain mundane. Is this true? If so, why? What is so special about your kind?"

Nephis took a sip of champagne, thought for a moment, and then said calmly:

"There is nothing special about Legacies, as far as one's chances of becoming infected go. We are not inherently predisposed to Awaken, unlike what many people believe. There are just certain measures that a clan can undertake to make sure that its heirs do."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"...Like what?"

Neph looked at him evenly.

"It is simple, really. The parents of a Legacy child just have to implore for assistance from a Saint. That is why lesser clans always seek to ally themselves with more powerful ones. The child is brought to the Dream Realm, and then returned to the clan. This way, the seed is already planted in their soul.

Once they come of age, it is inevitable for the seed to bloom, and bring them to the First Nightmare."

Sunny frowned, feeling something strange about her phrasing.

"Seed? As in… the Seed of Nightmare?"

Changing Star calmly nodded.

"Of course. The First Nightmare is not different from all the rest. It is also born from a Seed. It is just that this Seed does not grow in the Dream Realm. Instead, it grows in a human's soul. Have you never thought why there are no Gates of the First Category?

Well… there are, of course. Every Aspirant that fails their First Nightmare becomes a miniature Gate, allowing a single Nightmare Creature to enter the waking world. That is why their corpses turn into monsters."

Chapter-794: Adulthood

The sudden revelation brought the mood down for a few minutes. Sunny silently drank his champagne, thinking about what Neph had just said. It made a lot of sense, in a dark and disturbing way. It also shed some light on how the Spell chose its victims.

He doubted that a Seed of Nightmare, no matter how small, could bloom in just any soul. It probably required fertile soil to take root… of course, in this ravaged world, there were plenty of broken and traumatized people whose souls could nurture a Nightmare Seed. It had been even more so fifty years ago, when the Spell first appeared.

Had the collective anguish and torment of those lucky few who had survived the Dark Times summoned it from whatever hell the Spell existed in, ushering the rise of the First Generation of the Awakened and everything that followed?

He did not know, and doubted that he would find out anytime soon, if ever. Nevertheless, there was another interesting hint in what Nephis had explained to them.

If Legacies wanted their children to inherit the mantle, and only Saints could ensure that the poor kids would be doomed to either Awaken or die… then Saints held even more power among the Legacy clans than he had thought.

And who were the first Saints of humanity?

Asterion, Ki Song, Anvil of Vale… and Broken Sword. They were the first, and at some point the only people who all Legacy clans had to befriend if they wanted to ensure that their bloodlines continued walking on the path of Ascension.

Was that, perhaps, the initial reason that had elevated the great clans above all the rest?

'Interesting…'

He was not in the mood to ponder the origins of power that the Sovereigns held, however. Thinking about the great clans made him feel sour. Since today was Sunny's day off, he chased the weary thoughts away and tried to enjoy his drink instead.

Cassie, meanwhile, said with a deep frown:

"Isn't it too cruel, to subject your children to such fate? And without even giving them a choice! Only one out of three Aspirants survives the First Nightmare. Of course, that strongly depends on how well-prepared they are, so the number should be less gruesome among the Legacies. But… still… what kind of parent would do something like that to their child?"

Nephis lingered for a while, then sighed.

"It all depends on your point of view. Sure, it might seem cruel to some. But some might see it as giving their child a chance to grow strong in a world that is not kind to the powerless. Legacies are a warrior caste, at their core. They were born from a ruthless war, one that almost destroyed all of humanity. I can understand why they value strength and duty above all else."

All that talk about parents and children brought Sunny into a dark mood. He was twenty now… he was more or less an adult. In fact, he was already older than his mother had been when she had him.

This realization made him feel very strange.

Sunny stared into his glass for a few minutes with a grim expression, then sighed and stood up.

"I'll be back in a few."

With that, he left his friends and went away in search of a bathroom. In truth, he just wanted to be alone for a bit.

Soon, he was staring at his reflection as the water was running from an exquisite brass faucet. The young man staring at him from the mirror did not seem amused.

Sunny frowned, thinking about whether Mordret was hiding somewhere in the mirror. It had become a habit of his to consider such things from time to time.

Luckily, this time, the Prince of Nothing seemed to be nowhere to be found. Sunny sighed in relief, and then left the bathroom to return to the VIP lounge.

On his way, however, he encountered a small disturbance.

A group of young men and women were blocking his way, discussing something with one of the club's employees in loud voices. Their clothes looked extremely expensive, and their appearance was impeccably high-class. As he came closer, he heard the most extravagant-looking member of the group saying with outrage:

"...What do you mean, you can't let us inside? This is our usual spot! I can see from here that there's plenty of room left in the lounge! The beautiful ladies inside wouldn't mind some company, I'm sure. Actually, I am willing to bet that my friend and I can show them far greater time than their present… companion."

The hostess looked at him and said in an awkward tone:

"Sir… I am very sorry… but the whole VIP lounge was reserved by the esteemed guests…"

The young man scoffed.

"Esteemed guests? Do you even know who I am? I sincerely doubt that anyone in this ramshackle parlor of yours has more esteem than I!"

Sunny sighed, approached the group of young people, and patted the loudmouth on the shoulder. The young men looked down in confusion, then frowned.

"I suggest you unhand me, friend… what do you want?"

Sunny smiled.

"Relax, buddy… I just want to give you a small piece of advice."

He hugged the young man with one arm, turned him to face the VIP lounge, and pointed at Nephis, Cassie, Effie, and Kai, who could barely be seen from that spot.

"Do you see these people? Do you know who they are?"

The loudmouth scowled, then thought for a moment and ask with curiosity:

"Oh, you know these beauties? Who are they?"

Sunny's grin grew wider.

"Well, let me tell you. They are all experienced murderers and killers. I once saw the tall one tear a Fallen Beast apart, devour its meat, and gnaw on its bones. The pretty guy next to her used to be nice, but after being burned alive and having his skin replaced with primitive grafts by an unlicensed medical practitioner, he developed some strange ideas.

That delicate blonde girl is actually the most terrifying. There are fifty powerful Awakened that follow her around like lost puppies and eat from the palm of her hand, all willing to obey her commands. Every one of them is a maniac. That stunning, incredible beauty next to her… boy, I don't even know where to start. She was contemplating killing everyone in this club just half an hour ago.

Luckily, we managed to distract her…"

With each word, the young man grew paler and paler. His friends were suddenly silent, too. When Sunny was done speaking, the loudmouth nervously looked at the pale hand that was resting on his shoulder, and asked in a small voice:

"A—and… and who might you be?"

Sunny smiled brilliantly:

"Me? Oh, I live with two of these girls. I have a nice house, you know, with very special facilities… of the underground kind, if you know what I mean. The third, I had to spend almost a month locked in a cage with that one. Gods, that was rough. As for the skin-graft

guy… he drives me around…"

The young man turned slightly green, then gently moved Sunny's hand off his shoulder and backed away.

"I… I s—see. Thank you very much for the advice, fr… sir. On second thought, we should be going. My, oh my, look at the time!"

His group suddenly disappeared, as if they had never been there in the first place.

Sunny looked at the hostess and shrugged.

"Well, whatever. By the way, we're out of snacks. Could you bring us some more? Just… no honey, please!"

Chapter-795: Moment of Peace

To Sunny's absolute shock… nothing really happened for the rest of the night. There was no deadly brawl that forced the cohort to intervene, no emissary of the great clans arrived to crash the party, no Gate opened right in front of the club. He had been fully prepared for something to go terribly wrong, but in the end, nothing did.

'How odd!'

The five Masters simply had a good time listening to loud music, being served delicious drinks and food, and enjoying each other's company. Sunny did not know if this outing was helping Nephis in a way that she had hoped it would, but he found it unexpectedly relaxing. Spending quality time with good friends was what normal humans were supposed to enjoy, after all.

However... he had never had such an opportunity as a mundane. Sunny had never really fit into any of the groups he had tried to become a part of in the outskirts. He had always existed on their periphery before being expelled from them, as if something about him caused a subconscious rejection.

He did not really know what had changed. Maybe it was the people he was with, or maybe it was the circumstances that had brought them together. Most likely, it was Sunny himself that had become different. In any case, for the first time in his life, he felt safe and secure about his place. He felt as if he truly belonged with these people.

That did not mean that they were connected at the hip, of course. In fact, the members of the cohort had plenty of differences and underlying conflicts that had the potential to push them away from each other. Even the phrase itself was not exactly accurate… at this point, they were not really members of a distinct cohort anymore.

Even if all five chose to pursue the same goal together — which was rather improbable — Masters rarely operated in groups. They were too rare and powerful for such an arrangement. Most Ascended acted independently, only gathering together to face especially terrible threats.

But that was alright. This was how mature relationships were supposed to work. Sunny and his friends did not have to spend every waking minute together to preserve their bond. It was deep and tempered enough to remain strong even if each of them walked their separate path from now on.

Still… the prospect of separation made Sunny feel wistful. He would have preferred for the five of them to stay together, at least in some capacity. However, the future was too obscure. Until the fateful ball, it was hard to say in which direction their lives would go.

That was why this rare moment was so precious.

Throwing all serious thoughts out of his mind, Sunny relaxed and tried to enjoy it as much as he could.

Who knew when they would have a chance to spend such a peaceful evening together again… if ever.

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Steel was once again striking against steel in the underground dojo.

Well… alloy was striking against alloy, to be more precise.

For once, Sunny was not suffering on the receiving end of Changing Star's assault. The slender young woman was actually sitting on top of his inactive sleeping pod with her eyes closed, meditating as she controlled the soul essence rushing through her body.

Instead, Sunny was defending himself against earnest, but amateurish attacks delivered by Rain.

'What a nice change of pace…'

The teenage girl was trying her best to get through his defense, but

even when Sunny drastically toned down his speed and strength, her efforts were simply not enough. Despite her hard work, outstanding talent, and the swift improvement she had made, Rain was like an open book for him.

Of course, he couldn't expect much from a mundane teenager. Still… her performance today was far from stellar.

Sunny frowned.

"Concentrate! You are distracted!"

Rain gritted her teeth and tried, but her mind was obviously elsewhere. A few minutes later, he was forced to command her to stop and stared at his pupil with dissatisfaction.

"Are you going to take it seriously or not? What is wrong with you today?"

Sunny knew that he had lucked out with his student. Unlike most teenagers, Rain had never given him any trouble with regard to her diligence and motivation. It was only natural for her to try and slack off eventually… but he had already gotten used to his sister giving it her all during their lessons. Now, nothing short of excellence would do!

Rain breathed heavily, then threw a furtive glance at the alcove containing the sleeping pod and the Dreamscape pod. Her cheeks turned slighltly red.

"Sorry… I just… I can't! Lady Changing Star is here!"

Sunny scowled.

"What about her?"

The teenage girl looked at him with embarrassment and then said in a small voice:

"You don't get it... she's watching…"

Sunny blinked a couple of times and then stared at her in confusion.

"Her eyes are closed! And anyway… you can't fight properly because someone is watching? Are you kidding me? Do you think that battles happen in private or something?"

Rain shook her head.

"It's not just someone! It's the Changing Star! She is… she is… you know! Famous!"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"I am famous too, you know. But look at Nephis. She is somewhat of my number one fan, as it turns out… yet she is practicing diligently, without letting anything distract her. She is not starstruck at all!"

The teenage girl shook her head again.

"It's different! I know that you are a big deal. I am also used to seeing Effie and Lady Cassia. Even… even Night. But Lady Nephis is on a whole other level. She's not just a celebrity… she actually matters!

She is one of the most… the mostest people!"

Sunny glared at his little sister.

'Actually matters? Ouch.'

He sighed, then lowered his alloy stick and summoned the Endless Spring.

"I guess we're going to have a different kind of lesson today."

Sunny put a hand on Rain's shoulder and pointed at Nephis.

"You're a smart kid, Rain. Your father works for the government. You should be able to separate truth from propaganda. Sure, Neph is an extraordinary individual, and she achieved a lot of incredible things. But she is just a human. All that stuff that is clouding your head is just an illusion that other humans created to shove an uplifting narrative down the population's throat.

You can't be that gullible and believe in things that aren't real."

The teenage girl remained silent for a bit, then frowned.

"But... these things are real. Whether they are true or not, people believe in them. So they're real."

Chapter-796: Real Deal

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"What do you mean?"

Rain glanced at him and shrugged.

"It is because my father works for the government that I know this stuff. Well… let's say that millions of people believe that Lady Nephis is the hero that is going to lead humanity to conquer the Fourth Nightmare. It doesn't matter if she truly is. As long as people believe it, she has influence over them. Her image might be an illusion, but that influence is real.

Which means that her power is also real. Do you understand?"

He stared at her in bewilderment.

"So… you are saying that just because someone decided to make Neph into a powerful hero and manipulated people into believing that she is, she actually became one?"

Rain nodded.

"Think about it. If Lady Nephis decides to appear in public tomorrow and appeal for people to take arms and join the government army, tens of thousands of new recruits will answer the call. Maybe even hundreds of thousands! How can something that can affect hundreds of thousands of lives not be real? So, she is different from a celebrity like Night, or a Master like you. She is the real deal."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

'Why am I getting schooled by my student? About lies and deceit, of all things!'

The worst part of it was that Rain made a lot of sense. Power was an elusive concept… so was the difference between the real and the unreal. It was easy to point at an object and say that it was real. One could see it, touch it, and break it. But what about less tangible things? Was friendship real?

Or love? Or belief, for example?

If belief in something could affect millions of people, cause them to throw themselves into a war, persecute a group of individuals, or build incredible miracles of architecture, it was indeed stupid to say that the thing they believed in was not real. Since it was able to exert influence on the real world, the object of their belief stopped being an illusion and became something different.

Something like a… a deity?

Sunny frowned.

'What the hell am I thinking about? I was supposed to discipline my lazy student, not go on a philosophical tangent about the nature of divinity!'

It did not apply to actual gods, anyway. When they had been alive, the gods did not care about who believed in them and why. Why would they, if their power had been born long before humanity even existed?

At that point, Nephis suddenly turned her head and said without opening her eyes:

"You talk too much. Keep swinging that sword, Rain."

The teenage girl flinched and obediently raised her weapon.

"Yes, Lady Nephis!"

Sunny opened his mouth.

'Wait… who's the teacher here?!'

Neph, meanwhile, lingered for a moment and added:

"The power you talk about might be real, but it is fragile and insubstantial. It can be broken just as easily as it was created… unless the person wielding it has actual strength to defend it. At the end of the day, nothing that has been handed to you is as valuable as what you have nurtured and cultivated yourself. So… don't slack off in your training."

Her expression softened a little, and the corner of her mouth curved upward.

"You are doing very well already. Just continue practicing with the same determination."

A bright smile suddenly appeared on Rain's face.

"Really? You really think so? Sunny said so, too! He said that I am way better than he was!"

Nephis slowly shook her head.

"Sunny did not have a systematic education and the solid foundation that you enjoy. He never had a proper teacher, let alone a personal tutor. And yet, he has achieved so much, in such a short time. You are far from his level… for now. Even if you catch up to his corresponding accomplishments, it won't be enough. With your background and advantages, the only acceptable result is to surpass them."

Sunny scoffed.

"Yeah, no way that happens…"

Rain threw an angry look at him, and then said defensively:

"But… I am not even a Sleeper. I don't have a soul core and an Aspect. I can't do what he did."

Neph opened her eyes and looked at the teenage girl somberly.

"It doesn't matter if you are an Awakened, a Sleeper, or a mundane human. Chances are, you won't even be infected by the Spell. That doesn't mean that you have an excuse to remain weak. In fact, that

only makes your need to grow stronger more dire."

She sighed.

"Most people in this world are mundane, and yet, they face the same dangers. I've known many brave individuals who did not possess supernatural strength or a powerful Aspect. It takes… a lot of courage to resist the tyranny of the Spell without them. Those people might have not wielded weapons or fought on the frontlines of this war, but they were more courageous than most Awakened I've seen.

And the impact they made was no less real."

Nephis closed her eyes again and resumed cycling her essence.

"Strength is strength. Whether you become an Awakened or not, you'll need it. So, train earnestly. Don't let my presence distract you."

Sunny felt like he urgently needed to say something. He cleared his throat and looked at Rain solemnly:

"Uh… yeah. This world is not kind to the weak! Well, you know this… wasn't that the reason you asked me to train you, in the first place? So, stop staring at Neph and get to work!"

The teenage girl hesitated for a few moments, and then bowed.

"Thank you, grand-teacher!"

Sunny ground his teeth.

'What? Why don't I get a thank you? What the hell?!'

The alloy stick in his hand came to life, shooting forward to strike Rain on the shoulder. However, the girl had not let down her guard. Reacting with surprising speed, she sidestepped his attack and deflected the stick with her training sword, then counterattacked. Sunny almost got hit in the nose.

He hid his surprise and continued pressuring his student.

'Well, whatever just happened... appears to have worked?'

Rain did not seem distracted anymore, at least.

Chapter-797: Different Side

On a cold winter morning, two people were making their way through the black slush that drowned a rundown street, piling high near the dirty walls of the cheap panel buildings that clung to each other, as if for warmth. The loud sound of their steps echoed in the dim twilight, making it seem as if a monster was chewing on rotten flesh.

Nephis glanced at the dirt covering her expensive boots, then smelled the air and grimaced. Adjusting the collar of her white coat, she then glanced at Sunny and asked:

"Why are we here, exactly?"

He shoved his hands into his pockets and shrugged.

"Weren't you told to submerge yourself into how mundane humans live? Well, here we are. This is life, too."

He gestured at the ugly landscape that surrounded them and sighed.

After several years... Sunny was back in the outskirts.

'Brings back memories…'

In the aftermath of the collapse of old humanity, ravages of war and natural cataclysms made most of the planet uninhabitable. To exist in relative safety, people had to congregate in large cities like the one he had grown up in… the Northern Quadrant Siege Capital. Everywhere else was either drowned underwater or looked like a desert.

Of course, life persisted. Some trees and plants were still clinging to life. Large mammals mostly went extinct, but a few species of animals and insects had managed to adapt. However, the damage to most

ecosystems was too severe. The earth turned barren, the water turned poisonous, and even the air itself was not safe to breathe anymore.

Luckily, humans had technology to help them survive. The city incorporated sophisticated water filtration systems, food distribution infrastructure and other means of keeping the population alive. It was surrounded by tall barrier walls that prevented excessive microdust, various toxins, stray remnants of weaponized bacteria, harmful radiation, and other hazards from getting into the air supply.

Sunny did not know much about how the barriers worked, but they were sufficiently effective in keeping the city in a bubble of breathable air. Of course, each district also possessed its own additional means of purifying the air even further.

The problem, however… was that the barriers were stationary, while the city was not. The human population across the planet had dropped, but here in NQSC, it was slowly growing. As a result, the city grew, too. It stretched further and further, both into the sky and underground. Of course, it also sprawled horizontally. Eventually, the city had outgrown the circle of barriers.

Hence, the outskirts appeared.

Although there were new barrier walls in construction, their completion required vast amounts of funding, human resources, and even more time. The colossal, skeletal frames of the barriers had loomed above the outskirts for as long as Sunny could remember, unfinished. With what he knew now, he doubted that they would ever be completed at all.

In any case, whole generations of people like him had already lived and died outside their protection. The air in the outskirts might not have been as bad as in the desolate wilderness beyond, but it was far from safe. Those who breathed it every day did not tend to enjoy good health or long lives.

It reeked.

Breathing in the familiar stench, Sunny struggled not to follow Neph's example and grimace. He had been accustomed to the smell for most

of his life and never paid it much attention, but just a few years of sweet life in the Dream Realm and in the better parts of the city made it seem rather intense.

'What's the big deal… it's not that bad in winter, anyway…'

Just like the air, all other facets of life in the outskirts were barely suited for human life, as well. The buildings were straining to keep themselves together, clean water was scarce, most food came in the form of synthpaste rations provided by the government. Everything was dirty, worn out, and on the verge of collapse. The infrastructure barely functioned.

Theoretically, there was supposed to be a working transportation system with connections to the rest of the city, but in practice, it broke down and malfunctioned so often that getting anywhere with its help was hard. That was the reason why Sunny and Nephis were currently on foot.

He did not regret this turn of events, however, because that gave them the chance to get a good look at people who lived in the outskirts. Just like the slums themselves, the inhabitants looked decrepit. They were all frail, thin, and with unhealthy skin. The most striking difference was their height.

People who lived in the outskirts were much shorter than those who lived in the inner city, mostly due to malnourishment and sickness.

In short, they all looked similar to how Sunny had been before the First Nightmare.

Looking at them now, he couldn't help but think of his past. Only three years and a few months ago, he had left this place, thinking that he would never return. But Sunny was already a very different person. He saw the familiar sights differently, too.

'This is so strange…'

Sunny had always thought of himself as someone from the outskirts, but now, after traveling through several regions of the Dream Realm and building a life for himself in the city, Sunny suddenly understood

that the outskirts were not a monolithic place.

They were actually vast and encompassed numerous different areas. He had only ever known and explored a small part of them. The only world he had known for most of his life was even smaller than he had thought.

How could it not be so? Sunny had never considered such things, but after his last conversation with Master Jet, he realized the true scope of it all. From what she had told him, there were somewhere between sixty and seventy million people living in the outskirts.

Twenty percent of the total population of the city existed in these unpleasant conditions, barely surviving as they were slowly ground to dust.

If the mass evacuation from Antarctica succeeded, that number was going to grow even further.

The outskirts… were much greater than Sunny had ever thought. More than that, every city that remained on Earth had its own version of them, even if the excess population of NQSC was by far the largest.

Thinking about all the struggle, misery, and desperate hope that surrounded him, Sunny sighed. People were people. Even in this pit, they found ways to adapt and find moments of happiness. They never lost their motivation to live and seek purpose. It's just that those moments were rare, and their lives were usually on the shorter side.

His family had not been unhappy, until it was destroyed. People more lucky than him could have a semblance of a decent life even in the outskirts, although their chances were slim.

Nephis grew silent, observing the inhabitants of the outskirts with her usual distant expression. However, there was a hint of emotion hiding deep in her eyes.

After a while, she turned to Sunny and asked:

"Are we here to just walk around?"

He looked forward, then shook his head.

"No. We came here for a reason…"

Chapter-798: Lonely Tree

Soon, the narrow street they were walking on made way for a small lot. Spaces like these were not rare in the outskirts, since no one really bothered with city planning here. The mess of streets and alleys grew chaotically, with many of them being nothing but an accidental result of tall buildings, factories, and massive human hives being constructed in close proximity to each other.

As a result, there were plenty of random gaps like this one around. What made the empty lot special, however, was that it had somehow turned into a small park. Greenery was exceedingly rare in the outskirts, which made the park especially precious.

The modest space in front of them was currently covered by dirty snow, but come spring, patches of real grass were going to appear from beneath it. There were a few bushes, a frozen pond, and a lonely tree that somehow clung to life despite all reason. Currently, it stood bare and dark, devoid of the bright crown of its leaves.

The park was surrounded by tall buildings, making it seem as if it was situated on the bottom of a deep well. Sparse sunlight fell on the tree from far above, illuminating its thin branches and the grey snowflakes that swirled in the air around them. There were several clean pathways through the snow, as well as a few damaged and vandalized benches here and there.

Several people were sitting on the benches, enjoying a quiet moment of respite. They gave the young woman dressed in white and the young man dressed in black uneasy looks.

Nephis studied the park for a few moments, then glanced at Sunny:

"Aren't you wary that something can happen?"

He took a look at her, then at himself. Both were obviously out of

place, considering their physical appearance and expensive clothes. Everything about them screamed of wealth, status, and citizenship.

Sunny doubted that the inhabitants of the outskirts would recognize them as Ascended, but they would inevitably come to the conclusion that the strangers were rich.

He shrugged.

"What can happen? Even if some idiots decide to try and rob us, the worst they can do is shoot at us with cheap firearms. I doubt that their bullets can bruise our skin, let alone penetrate it."

One would have to use a heavy assault vehicle with state-of-the-art magnetic cannon, or better yet a spelltech armament, to leave a small scratch on the body of a Master. Even then, landing a shot would not be easy.

Nephis shook her head.

"I'm not worried about us. I'm worried about… the idiots."

Sunny smiled.

"Well, don't be. If there is one thing we outskirt rats are good at, it's self-preservation. Anyone can see that both of us are killers. They'll stay away."

Changing Star gave him a hesitant nod.

A few moments later, she asked:

"...So what is the reason?"

He lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

"I met your mother already. So I thought I would bring you to meet mine."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"I thought your mother was dead."

Sunny nodded.

"She is. Come…"

He headed toward the tree, knowing that Neph would follow. As they approached, Sunny sighed and said in a neutral tone:

"Most people in the outskirts don't get to have a burial, so there are no graves, either. Space is a precious commodity… energy and fuel are, too. Human remains are usually dissolved, and then discarded. Still, it is nice to have a special place to remember them by. This tree is such a place for me. A long time ago, I carved two lines into it — one for my mom, and one for my dad."

He stopped and stared at the tree, a distant expression appearing on his face.

In truth, Sunny had been thinking about his mother a lot recently, and that prompted him to visit the small park. Taking Nephis along was just an afterthought. He had decided that showing her the hidden side of the city would do her some good. It could give her perspective, at least.

As they stood silently under the tree, Nephis studied it for a while, and then suddenly said:

"There are three lines."

Sunny looked at her in confusion.

"What?"

Neph pointed to the bottom of the trunk.

"There is a third line."

He stared at her for a moment, then turned away.

"Oh. The third line is for me. I added it before going away to face the First Nightmare."

Changing Star glanced at him, then asked in her usual even tone:

"Were you not confident of conquering it?"

Sunny laughed.

"Gods, no! I was pretty sure that I would die. I was ready to, actually. Back then… I was sort of ambivalent about life, I guess. Very few people from the outskirts survive their Nightmares. We are physically weak and less educated than proper citizens.

Local schools are not exactly known for training skilled fighters."

He remained silent for a moment, and then added:

"It's weird, actually. A large part of why I survived the First Nightmare was exactly because I did not really care to survive. Since I already accepted that I would die, I did not worry too much about anything. No matter what happened, I was able to calmly react instead of panicking. I acted with unrestrained coldness and calculation."

Sunny sighed.

"Of course, such an attitude is of limited utility. It helped me at the start, but one can't get far by acting like a walking corpse. It was only halfway through the Nightmare that I suddenly decided that I wanted to live. And once I did… I really, really wanted to live. That was what pushed me to go on despite all reason, and eventually escape."

He looked at the lonely tree, lingered, and said:

"I haven't been back here since. When I was carving the third line for myself, I had no idea that I would return one day as a Master, let alone one with the Special Strategic Asset designation and enough value to make both the government and the great clans fight over me."

Sunny shook his head and grinned.

"...What a strange turn of events, huh?"

Chapter-799: Outskirt Rat

They stood silently under the tree for a while. Eventually, Nephis looked at him and said evenly:

"You did well."

Sunny glanced at her with a pale smile, then nodded.

"I guess I did, didn't I? My mom would have been very happy. If she was alive, that is. I am healthy, well-fed, and have a house in a good part of the city. I even found my… a student. These things might not sound like much to you, but to her, they would have been like a dream."

He turned to the tree and added after a short pause:

"I don't really remember my dad too well, because I was too little when he passed away. But my mom, I remember her perfectly. She was… like a ray of sunshine. The strangest thing, though, is that when I was a kid, she was the whole world to me. I thought that she knew everything, could do anything. But now, I realize that she was barely older than we are.

She was more or less a kid herself."

Nephis looked at him and said:

"But we aren't kids."

Sunny tilted his head, then shrugged.

"That is true, I guess. We are adults, which is a strange thought. I don't really feel very different from how I was before, at least not in terms of being confident and knowing what the hell I am doing."

Changing Star sighed, then shook her head a little.

"That is because you have been an adult for a long time. People like us have to grow up early."

Sunny thought about it for a moment.

"I don't know. I have a suspicion that when I look back on today in a decade or so, I will be dismayed by how big of an idiot I was."

Nephis smiled with the corner of her mouth.

"...That has nothing to do with adulthood."

He spared her a short glance and scoffed.

"That was the point where you were supposed to say that I am not an idiot, you know."

She stared at him with a deadpan expression, then said in her usual tone:

"I know."

Sunny couldn't help but laugh.

"Anyway. I don't really understand why I wanted to come here. I guess I expected to feel something… and I do. It's just not what I thought I would feel."

Nephis lingered for a few moments. Eventually, she said with a hint of hesitation in her voice:

"Do you maybe want to say something to your mother?"

Sunny lingered for a while, then shook his head.

"What is the point? She is dead, and the dead can't hear anything. They are simply gone. They only exist in the memories of the past. I would rather concentrate on the future."

Despite the fact that he had achieved many things that his mother would have wanted for him, it had not been without a cost. His house, his wealth, and the fridge full of food he had back home were

only one side of his life. The other side was full of dire things like the Sovereigns, the Obel Scale…

And Nephis.

His bond with her was a dire thing, too.

His future was not cloudless at all.

The past few weeks had been some of the calmest and most enjoyable in Sunny's life. He had mostly been in Neph's company, doing nothing but training and spending time with her. He had hidden his head in the sand and refused to think about all the troubles that loomed on the horizon.

That pleasant time was coming to an end.

In a few days, Nephis was going to finally leave to face the Fire Keepers. About a week after that, they were going to accept Clan Valor's invitation and attend their ball. After that, everything was going to change.

Their futures were going to be decided on that day.

Sunny found himself standing at a crossroad, not knowing where any of the roads actually led. Even worse, he was not the only one making the decision on what turn to take.

All of it was so tiresome.

He sighed, then walked over to the tree and touched it for a brief moment.

'Hey, mom. It's me. I am… doing well, I guess. Rain is well, too. She looks like you very much. You would have been really proud of her.'

Sunny felt rather stupid at that moment, but at the same time, strangely soothed. He hesitated for a few seconds, and then thought:

'Anyway, I don't think I will be able to visit again for a long time. Not that you're really here. Oh… that young woman right there is Nephis. She is my… well… it's complicated. In any case, I think you would

have liked her. I have several other friends, too.

So I am in good hands. You don't have to worry about me.'

With that, he stepped back, looked at the lonely tree one last time, and turned away.

"Let's go."

As they walked away, Neph looked at him and asked tentatively:

"Are you alright?"

Sunny smiled crookedly and shrugged.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

She opened her mouth to say something, but at that moment, several figures suddenly appeared from behind a corner, surrounding them. They were all dirty and disheveled, looking like typical outskirts thugs. The leader, a muscular man with a chemical scar on his face, pointed a kinetic handgun at them and grinned.

"Not so fast, lovebirds. Rich kids like you really should think twice before coming to where you don't belong…"

Sunny silently palmed his face.

"...so why don't you give us your communicators and other valuables, before something bad hap…"

'Damn it! This is... so embarrassing!'

Before the thug was done speaking, Sunny appeared near him, grabbed the barrel of his gun and squeezed gently, turning it into a deformed steel pancake. The muscular man stared at his weapon in shock, then suddenly let go of it and jumped back.

"A—Awakened! Run!"

The thugs all froze for a second, then paled and dashed away, disappearing as fast as they had appeared a few moments ago.

Sunny was left standing with a broken gun in his hand.

He sighed heavily, then threw it into a rusty trash container that stood a couple dozen meters away. The gun clanked against its edge as it disappeared inside.

'Unbelievable…'

The most disheartening thing about it all was that he knew the leader of the thugs. Growing up in this area of the outskirts, Sunny had run into this particular gang more than once, sometimes being mistreated by them, sometimes running small errands for the thugs in hopes of earning some food.

And yet, none of them had recognized him, instead mistaking Sunny for a rich city kid.

He looked at Nephis and cleared his throat.

"Uh… sorry about that."

She shook her head.

"No need to apologize."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and continued walking away from the park.

'I guess I am really not an outskirt rat anymore…'

Chapter-800: Facing the Music

A few days passed in pleasant tranquility. Eventually, however, the time ran out. Nephis gathered her things and left for the Immortal Flame manor, leaving Sunny alone.

It was a bittersweet feeling.

Sweet because he finally had the house for himself once again. Bitter because… well… Sunny was not sure that he enjoyed his home being so empty anymore.

Nevertheless, he had chosen not to follow her to join the rest of the cohort yet. Sunny felt like the looming ball was going to change a lot of things, and had to prepare a few contingencies. If the worst happened, there was a big possibility that he would be gone for a very long time again.

There were several things he had to do, just in case.

His lecture course at the Academy had just started, but at this rate, it was under threat of ending prematurely. Sunny spent some time imparting his students with the best and most essential knowledge he could relay in such a short amount of time, but other than that, there was not much else he could do to prevent his academic reputation from potentially receiving a hit.

Luckily, all Masters led hectic lives. The administration was long accustomed to their star lecturers disappearing for months on end without much of a warning, so his case was not unique.

His second worry was the Brilliant Emporium. The Memory store was already in a difficult position because of the invisible blockade that had prevented Sunny from visiting the Dream Realm and hunting down Nightmare Creatures for half a year. Their inventory was running low.

In the past six months, Sunny had slowly shifted his business in the direction of selling Memory versions of mundane items that he weaved. That was not a straightforward endeavor, however. Sure, the idea of having a toothbrush Memory sounded pleasant… but he had to use a soul shard to create one.

Considering how expensive soul shards were in the real world, the price of a simple toothbrush would have been simply unreasonable.

So, after thinking for a while, Sunny had come up with a strategy of shifting his focus from necessities and toiletries to luxury items. That way, he could price them high enough to earn more than the price of a soul shard.

Rich clients already had access to mundane items in the Dream Realm due to their connections to Masters and Saints, but were willing to pay a lot for the convenience of having various luxuries readily at hand.

So, Sunny spent a few days painstakingly creating an especially large batch of these extravagant Memories and then met with Aiko to transfer them. After thinking for a while, he gave her a strange set of instructions.

Sunny wanted the Brilliant Emporium to stock up on as many Memories that provided either warmth or resistance against cold as possible. The second priority went to Memories that could serve as a source of light, which were usually cheap and plentiful. He also told Aiko to sell every soul shard they had left.

The reason behind this decision was simple… the approaching disaster in Antarctica. Once the government announced the voluntary mobilization, a lot of people were going to need to equip themselves for the harsh realities of polar night. The large amount of opening Gates would also flood the market with soul shards, probably crashing their price to a certain extent.

In any case, he hoped that the Brilliant Emporium would survive for a while thanks to these measures, should something happen at the ball.

Lastly… there was Rain.

His sister was going to turn sixteen in a few months, which meant that Sunny had very little time left to prepare her for the potential First Nightmare. On the other hand… there were not a lot of things left that he could teach her. Of course, Rain still had a lot of room to improve, but at that stage, Sunny's presence was only of marginal use.

What she really needed to do was to truly internalize and assimilate the skills and knowledge that he had already imparted to her. While Sunny could help his sister along, most of the work had to be done by Rain herself.

Still, he used the week before the ball to the fullest extent. The teenage girl might have been sour about how intense their lessons suddenly became, but it was for her own good. She was already better prepared to face the Nightmare than he had been, by far.

Whether or not that would be enough, he did not know.

Other than these three things, there was not a lot for Sunny to do.

He prepared his home to go into conservation mode in case he did not return from the ball. He restocked the Covetous Coffer with various supplies for a long expedition. He fought against Saint to clean the rust off his battle instincts. He tinkered with his Memories for a bit, trying to improve them.

All of these preparations might have been for nothing… but Sunny was more willing to be wrong than to be unprepared.

Finally, the fateful day came.

Wincing at the thought of how much money he had spent on that thing, Sunny donned a stylish black suit and briefly looked at himself in the mirror. The bespoke attire had been made by a luxury establishment that serviced many prominent Legacies and incorporated the most rare and durable materials, many of them coming from the Dream Realm.

The suit was made in the style that many Awakened preferred,

existing somewhere between the modern fashion and the more antiquated aesthetic that Memories adhered to. It was elegant and fitting, including a stylish half cape and tall leather boots.

Even though Sunny had said a few strong words to Kai during the fittings, now that he looked at himself, he could not deny that he looked… rather good.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then sighed.

"Let's face the music, I guess."

With that, he briefly circulated essence through the coils of Soul Serpent, wrapped three of the four shadows around his body, and walked outside.

His carriage — in the form of a luxury PTV — was already waiting.

Chapter-801: Distinguished Guests

Five of them sat inside the sleek PTV, watching as the streets of the city flew by. Sunny was not the only one who had donned an extravagant suit. Kai was wearing an even more stylish attire, radiating so much grace and elegance that the interior of the moving vehicle seemed almost electrified.

Cassie had chosen a simple, but flattering gown of soft colors. Her bracelets and jewelry were picked to match the silver half-mask that she wore like a crown. The familiar blue-green cloak was draped around her shoulders. She was holding the Quiet Dancer by the scabbard, as if it was a cane.

Effie wore a white tunic with tasteful gold accents. There was a golden laurel resting on her head, with similar bracelets and anklets accentuating its sheen. With her olive skin and toned physique, she looked like an ancient goddess. The huntress seemed to be enjoying herself as she sipped champagne from a tall glass.

Nephis chose to wear a more practical attire, which was nevertheless equally splendid. Her knightly suit consisted of black trousers, a black doublet with silver embroidery, and a pristine white cape. The simple band of the Crown of Dawn accentuated the steely grey of her striking eyes. Her hands, clad in white gloves, rested calmly on her knees.

All of Sunny's worries about how pompous he looked in his expensive suit disappeared. Compared to the others, he looked almost underdressed.

Was there really any time to worry about appearances, anyway?

Looking at the members of the cohort, he hesitated for a moment,

and then asked:

"Are you ready?"

Nephis glanced at him, then turned back to the window.

"...It's just a ball."

He stared at her for a moment, then grinned. Then, he laughed.

"Oh, indeed. Indeed…"

Soon, the PTV left public streets and entered the road that led to the stronghold of the Valor clan. Although their main seat of power was situated in the Dream Realm, safely protected by the great walls of the legendary Bastion, the family obviously maintained several prominent properties in the waking world.

This one resembled a hybrid between an embassy and a sprawling fortress. The complex took enough area in the center of the city to be considered a separate district and encompassed a multitude of buildings, most of them just a few storeys high. More floors, of course, were situated underground, where the bulk of activity took place.

The purpose of the buildings ranged from serving as residences for the members of the clan and retainers to training centers for the household troops, research facilities dedicated to various applications of spelltech, and everything in between. Just like Nephis had said, a Legacy clan was not just a handful of people united by a bloodline.

It was a large organization that, in the case of Clan Valor, included thousands upon thousands of people from all walks of life.

The fortress also housed vaults where the sleeping pods of those Awakened who either belonged to or served the great clan were located, so security measures were nothing short of exaggerated. Sunny himself could see and feel plenty of sentries, both mundane and possessing greater powers. Judging by a slight frown that appeared on Kai's face, there were plenty more that he had failed to notice.

The complex was fully prepared to face any kind of attack, be it a manifestation of a Nightmare Gate or a sudden assault perpetrated by the forces of rival clans. On one hand, that made Sunny feel safe. On the other hand… escaping this stronghold would not be easy.

'Let's hope I won't need to.'

Other than that, the aesthetics of the complex were very pleasing to the eye. There were plenty of trees and grass around, with architecture that did a great job of hiding the utilitarian and militaristic design of the sprawling fortress.

In fact, if Sunny did not know any better, he would have thought that he was in the middle of a blissful garden district that was meant for people to relax in peace and tranquility.

Living here must have been very nice.

…Chances were, he would have an opportunity to experience that life rather soon.

'Yeah, as if that would happen.'

Sunny glanced at Nephis and then turned away, his face darkening.

A few minutes later, their PTV approached the center of the complex, where a grand structure stood, illuminated by bright spotlights. He felt a bit of awe when he noticed that it was built of stone blocks similar to those that Bastion itself consisted of. This hinted at the fact that the stones were brought to the waking world from the Dream Realm.

Considering that only powerful Masters and Saints could transport matter between two worlds, the cost of the great hall was nothing short of astronomical. He could hardly imagine a more impressive and effective proclamation of wealth and power… the great clans really knew how to set the stage.

The walls of the hall were decorated by vermilion banners that stretched from its roof to the very ground, each bearing the image of an anvil pierced by a sword. A red carpet led from the grand stairs to the road where a row of similarly luxurious PTVs were parked, slowly

moving as their distinguished passengers disembarked.

Neat rows of uniformed honor guards stood at the sides of the red carpet, forming a living corridor through which the guests had to walk before they reached the entrance. Everything about them screamed of discipline and power. These soldiers alone were enough to protect people invited to the ball from most dangers…

Not that the guests needed any protection.

Although there were a few high ranking mundane humans among them, most were either promising Awakened or Masters. There were even Saints here, which made Sunny feel rather uncomfortable.

If there was one group of people in the city he really wouldn't want to provoke, it was those attending the ball.

Sunny felt like a little fish being thrown in a tank full of hungry sharks.

He could probably fight off or at least escape from any one of these sharks. But all of them together?

'Still… I'm not without sharp teeth myself…'

Finally, their PTV reached the vermilion carpet.

Sunny waited for the door to open, then sighed and stepped outside.

Chapter-802: Feast of Deceit

Nephis walked forward with her usual impassive confidence. It was as though the magnificence of the towering hall, the rows of armor-clad honor guards, and the distinguished guests surrounding them did not deserve her attention, let alone apprehension. Her face was still and inscrutable, and her eyes were cold and focused.

As the rest of the cohort followed behind her, Sunny couldn't help but feel uneasy. Right now, he was especially frustrated at his lacking ability to read her moods. He just hoped that Changing Star was not going to try and assassinate the members of the Valor clan as soon as she saw them.

'No, no way… she wouldn't. Right?'

Their arrival caused a bit of a stir. Many eyes were suddenly directed at the four members of the cohort, but it was nothing compared to how many people were staring at Nephis, either openly or in secret.

She did not pay them any attention, so Sunny looked straight ahead and pretended to not care, either. Of course, he was tensely studying everything and everyone around them through his shadow.

Somehow, he felt as if he had returned to the Red Colosseum. Sunny almost expected the people surrounding them to start chanting "glory!" at any second.

Of course, that did not happen.

The cohort walked up the stairs and entered the grand hall, where they were led to massive doors that were carved of familiar wood.

As the doors opened into a vast chamber full of exquisitely dressed people, a loud voice announced:

"Lady Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan! Ascended Song of the Fallen! Ascended Raised by Wolves! Ascended Nightingale! Ascended Sunless!"

For a moment, every conversation in the hall paused. Everyone turned to look at the new arrivals.

Sunny frowned.

The amount of pressure that crashed into him was enough to make a mundane person kneel. It was not that the guests were consciously exerting it, just the side effect of so many powerful people being gathered in one place.

Just at first glance, he identified nearly a hundred Masters and a handful of Saints in the crowd, with each of the latter basically glowing like a beacon of power in the sea of people, surrounded by a small island of empty space. A very large chunk of humanity's defensive capabilities were gathered in this hall.

…If Sunny was pressured, then Nephis must have felt as if a mountain landed on her. And yet, she did not bat an eye.

A wave of whispers rose, barely audible in the harmonious hum of relaxing music.

"It's her."

"What? Changing Star is here?"

"Look, look! It's the heiress of Immortal Flame."

Even among the absolute elites, Neph's status was immense enough to create a commotion. The other four members got a lot of attention, too, as the brightest stars of the younger generation of Awakened. Both their SS designations and the rapid speed of their Ascension made them noteworthy people.

Subjected to hundreds of gazes, Nephis nodded curtly and walked toward the tables that offered drinks and refreshments. As she did, the arrival of another guest was announced, causing the excitement of the crowd to subside a little.

Sunny… felt incredibly awkward.

"So, uh… what do we do now?"

Kai simply smiled.

"We don't have to do anything, really, before the host arrives and commences the ball. Usually we would use this time to walk around and socialize, but in this case, there is no need. Everyone will come to us. So, just enjoy yourself, smile, and answer politely if someone addresses you."

Sunny shifted his shoulders.

'That is terrible advice!'

How was he supposed to enjoy himself and smile, knowing what was at stake? As for being polite… politeness often required a person to lie. What was he supposed to do if someone asked him a question that demanded a rude answer?

Luckily, he had nothing to fear. Very soon, a stream of people started to approach them, somehow making it seem as if they all just happened to walk by. However, all their attention was concentrated on Nephis. Barely anyone spared a moment to chat with the other members of the cohort, and even then, Sunny was the last in line.

Which suited him fine.

"Lady Changing Star, it is an honor to meet you!"

"You made us all proud, young lady. I was actually friends with your grandfather…"

"I once fought a battle side by side with your parents. The memory of their valiance was forever etched into my heart…"

Everyone wanted to if not become friends, then to at least establish a connection with the daughter of the hallowed clan that seemed to be rising from the ashes. Nephis remained calm, conversing with the great and powerful people that approached her in a neutral, but slightly stifled tone.

Sunny could feel the flames burning in her soul growing hotter and hotter, however.

She was filled with masterfully suppressed rage.

Well… he would be, too.

All these well-wishers could not wait to share the tales of how highly they valued and admired her parents and grandfather. And yet, they had been perfectly fine to do nothing when the Immortal Flame clan needed help. None of them had raised a hand to help Nephis when she was young, weak, and being hunted by the assassins of the hidden rulers of the Awakened society.

It was only now that she had become Ascended, and an absolutely outstanding one at that, that they remembered past friendships and tried to ingratiate themselves to her.

Their smiles and pretty words were worthless.

Their friendship was worthless.

This was all just a big charade.

Sunny observed the elites with a bit of bewilderment. Were they all such shameless liars, or did they actually believe their own lies? In any case, this feast of deceit was nothing short of delectable. If only it was not so amateurish…

After a while, he suddenly felt a cold shiver running down his spine. Turning his head slightly, Sunny noticed a familiar face.

An exquisitely beautiful woman in a dazzling dress the color of red wine was approaching them. She was graceful and elegant, with a supple figure and full, scarlet lips. Her most striking feature, however, was her skin… it was grey like stormy clouds, smooth like silk, and devoid of any imperfections.

The woman smiled, revealing perfectly even, pearly teeth.

"Lady Nephis. I am so glad to see you again."

Changing Star looked at her and lingered for a moment.

Then, she said:

"Seishan. I am… glad to see you, as well."

Chapter-803: Friendly Reminder

Seishan, the former lieutenant of the Bright Lord Gunlaug and leader of the handmaidens, was standing in front of them with a calm smile. Sunny had not seen her after the tumultuous escape from the Forgotten Shore, where she had held the line as the commander of the second defense bulwark of the Dreamer Army.

He had thought that becoming a Master would make him less susceptible to her presence, but it did not. Her striking beauty, her exotic looks, and the aura of mystery that surrounded Seishan were just as compelling as ever. The knowledge of how frightening her true nature was also made it impossible for him to remain unaffected.

Not to mention the most important fact of all…

Seishan was one of the adopted daughters of Ki Song, the ruler of the great Song clan and one of the three Sovereigns.

If anything, knowing more about her background only made Sunny pay the beautiful woman extra attention.

'What the hell is she doing here?'

Seishan, meanwhile, looked at the other members of the cohort and said with a small, but seemingly sincere smile:

"Athena, Kai, Cassia… Sunless. It is good to see you doing well, too."

Effie gave her a long look, then shrugged.

"Likewise. How have you and your girls been?"

After the return from the Forgotten Shore, half of the members of the former Dreamer Army had decided to follow Cassie and became known as the Fire Keepers. Of the remaining half, most had chosen a

different path, either remaining independent like Sunny and Aiko or joining various Legacy clans. All the surviving handmaidens, however, had followed Seishan back to Song.

Just like that, the great clan had not only received its lost daughter back, but also earned the utmost loyalty of a dozen extremely promising recruits.

Come to think of it, that might have been one of the reasons why Valor wanted to gain the allegiance of the Fire Keepers so badly.

A group of exceptional and supremely battle-hardened Awakened might not have been able to change the balance of power between the two great clans immediately, but in a few years, when the survivors of the Dreamer Army started becoming Masters or maybe even Saints, eventually, that could easily change.

Seishan responded in a serious tone:

"We are doing well. My clan embraced us with open arms. After reuniting with my sisters, I was also able to bring a lot of value to the Song family with my unique knowledge and experience… the long years I had spent on the Forgotten Shore were not for naught."

She had been stuck in that hell for far longer than any of them. In fact, Sunny did not know how many years Seishan had spent in the Dark City, exactly, but it might have been as high as nine or ten.

Being able to survive and hold on to power for so long spoke a lot about how resourceful and dangerous the daughter of Ki Song was… especially considering that, in the end, she was the only one of the old guard who had managed to escape.

No wonder the great clan was so eager to get her back.

Seishan looked at them and smiled.

"Of course, we have yet to achieve the same measure of success as the five of you. Reaching Ascension so soon after becoming Awakened is no small feat. You have my respect."

Her smile paled a little.

"...I will be going away to challenge my own Second Nightmare in a few days, as a matter of fact. This ball is the last opportunity I have to experience the wonders of the waking world before that."

She looked around wistfully and sighed.

'So… she is also in a hurry to become a Master, huh?'

Sunny stared at the grey-skinned beauty with a bit of apprehension. Seishan was already scary enough as an Awakened. How much more powerful would she become after Ascending?

Kai offered the former leader of handmaidens a reassuring smile.

"I am sure that you and your cohort will do fine. The Second Nightmare is a terrible challenge, but people who survived the Forgotten Shore are suited to face its dangers more than anyone else. You will triumph."

Before Seishan could answer, Nephis finally spoke. Looking at the daughter of Song impassively, she said in her usual even tone:

"I have to admit… I am surprised to see you here."

Seishan lingered for a moment.

"Oh. You must have heard about the recent disharmony between Song and Valor. Do not pay it too much attention, Lady Nephis. Despite our disagreements, it is still important to present a united front. I am here to keep up appearances."

Changing Star thought for a moment, then nodded.

"I understand… you are here to send a message. However, I find it curious that a junior member like you was chosen above more senior representatives of the great clan Song. One can't help but wonder what message exactly such a choice is intended to deliver."

Seishan's smile widened a little.

"Well… it is not my place to question the decisions of the elders. In any case, I am very happy that I got the chance to see you all again.

While we were never truly friends, I value what you have done for me and my wards, as well as what we went through together, a great deal."

Her pearly teeth glistened in the bright light of exquisite chandeliers, suddenly seeming much sharper.

"I hope that we will be able to deepen that bond one day. Of course, whether or not it blossoms into a real friendship depends on our decisions."

Sunny sighed.

'Ah…'

Seishan looked at them one last time. Strangely, her gaze lingered on him for a few extra moments. Then, she politely excused herself and left to mingle with other guests of the ball.

'So that's what it was all about.'

Her meaning was more than clear. Clan Song decided to not go as far as making an earnest effort to spoil the negotiations with Valor and try to recruit the members of the cohort and the Fire Keepers into its ranks instead.

However, they did issue a warning… make the right decision if you know what's good for you.

Stay away from our rivals… or else.

That threat might have been packaged into an exquisitely beautiful cover, but the underlying message remained quite clear.

Looking at the back of Seishan as she was walking away, Sunny shook his head.

'Did I somehow end up involved in… politics? By the Spell, I did, didn't I? Curses… why can't a guy just grow stronger than everyone in the world and unreasonably rich in peace?!'

Chapter-804: Whispering Blade

A few minutes later, the atmosphere in the great hall suddenly changed. The hum of voices grew quiet, and many of the guests shifted, turning to a particular spot. As Sunny watched, a tall figure appeared on a wide balcony above them.

The man was strong and severe, with a sharp face and even sharper, cold eyes. His black hair was touched by silver at the temples. He was wearing an elegant attire that somehow looked like a suit of impregnable armor despite being made of nothing but black fabric. His vermilion cloak moved slightly, as if touched by invisible wind.

As soon as the man appeared, Sunny felt a considerable pressure descending on the hall. The dignified stranger radiated so much power and authority that it was hard not to admire him… or fear him. He was a Saint, without a doubt.

What was more, his features looked slightly like that of Mordret and Morgan. For a moment, Sunny thought that he was looking at Anvil of Valor himself… but no, that could not be. Although the familial likeness was there, it was not too pronounced. The mythical Sovereign was also not supposed to be able to enter the waking world easily, let alone openly show himself in public.

That would just go against everything that the Sovereigns did to remain in the shadows.

'This… must be Saint Madoc of Valor, also known as Whispering Blade.'

Saint Madoc was one of Anvil's siblings and the nominal leader of the great clan Valor. Of course, Sunny knew who truly called the shots… but the status of this powerful man was by no means for show. Whispering Blade was a legendary warrior and one of humanity's most formidable champions in his own right.

As the guests quieted down, Saint Madoc looked at them from above with his steely blue eyes, and then smiled slightly. Instantly, the pressure receded, making the mundane humans in the crowd sigh with relief.

Morgan's uncle spoke, his strong voice easily reaching into every corner of the great hall:

"Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests. Welcome to the annual ball of the great clan Valor. It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you all under our roof once again. In the past year, many things have happened. Some of our brothers and sisters... are not with us anymore."

A somber silence settled over the hall. Every year brought a lot of death to Awakened. Even Masters were not spared from that fate... this year, in particular, had dealt a heavy blow to humanity.

Even though few knew of what had really happened, the absence of Saint Cormac was clearly felt by many. Transcendents were so exceedingly rare that the loss of even one of them echoed across the world.

As the guests turned somber, Whispering Blade's smile suddenly widened, dispelling the solemn mood.

"...Despite that, it pleases me to see many new faces among you. Humanity has grown stronger yet again! New heroes rose to carry the torch for those who had fallen in battle. With champions like these, our world has nothing to fear! Despite it all, we persevere. But more than that… we rise.

Nothing can stop our ascension."

He looked at the guests, and then sighed.

"Well, those of you who know me also know that I am not one for long speeches. To be honest… this one was actually written by my beloved wife, who is far more eloquent and wise than me. Not to mention pleasant to look at."

A wave of polite chuckles spread through the crowd. Saint Madoc

smiled once again.

"Today is not a day for sorrow. Today is a day for joy. And so… let the ball commence!"

As soon as he said that, the space in the middle of the hall was cleared, and the musicians started to play a magnificent and emotional composition. Whispering Blade danced the first dance himself, accompanied by a beautiful, mature woman. Moving with elegance and grace, they both looked breathtakingly splendid.

Soon, other pairs joined them.

Sunny observed the dance with a bit of interest. He had not known what to really expect from this ball, but to his relief, it was nothing like the awkward and almost comical sight that he had witnessed in the nightclub a few weeks ago.

The dancers were much more purposeful and elaborate in their movements. Both partners had to move in synchronicity to not disturb the flow of the dance, following the music with surprising skill. The gracefulness of their steps, the exquisite attires, the radiant physical beauty common among the Awakened, the luxurious decorations of the great hall… all of it made the ball look rather dazzling.

He was also able to appreciate the ceremony due to his familiarity with Shadow Dance. Of course, his battle style was not a literal dance… however, it was derived from one. In fact, every battle style had something in common with dancing, since both had to do with motion, coordination, agility, and rhythm.

So, even if Sunny was never taught how to dance, he was able to quickly learn the basics from just observing those who were better versed in it. He could have even joined the dancers… if he wanted to.

Of course, he didn't.

Sunny noticed that it was customary for men to invite the women to dance. As he watched, many handsome and distinguished guests offered their hands to their beautiful counterparts and led them to

the center of the hall.

More than a few burning gazes landed on Nephis, but were quickly doused by her cold, unapproachable expression. Fortunately or unfortunately, the other members of the cohort were caught in the cone of silence that surrounded her, so no one approached them either.

After some time, Kai invited Cassie to dance, while Effie wandered away in the direction of the tables that were barely standing, burdened by the weight of various delicacies.

Sunny, meanwhile, grew bored.

'Damn… how long do we have to wait? Are these negotiations going to start, or what?'

Eventually, he glanced at Nephis, then left her and walked away in search of a bathroom.

A few minutes later, he was washing his hands in front of a mirror. Looking at his pale reflection, Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then said:

"I know that you are there. Stop hiding."

Nothing happened for a few seconds.

...Then, his reflection suddenly offered him a pleasant smile.

"Oh. How did you know?"

Chapter-805: Conversation with a Mirror

When his reflection suddenly spoke, Sunny flinched and jumped back. A startled expression appeared on his face.

He stared at the mirror with wide eyes, then cursed and remained silent for a few seconds. Finally, Sunny uttered through gritted teeth.

"I did not know. I just developed a habit of saying random rubbish to mirrors in case something like this happens. Who knew that this time you would actually turn up?!"

Mordret, who disturbingly wore his face, blinked a couple of times, then laughed.

"So it was a bluff? Goodness… I can't believe I fell for this trick."

Sunny's reflection shook its head.

…Sunny himself, who felt incredibly troubled by the sight of his own likeness being inhabited by the Prince of Nothing, sucked in a breath of air, and then hissed:

"What are you even doing here? Have you entirely lost your mind?! This is the stronghold of Clan Valor!"

Mordret shrugged.

"Why? Can't I visit my own clan's ball?"

Sunny suppressed the desire to palm his face.

"Not if you want to live!"

But then again, why would he care if Mordret lived or died? Actually,

it would have been wonderful if the troublesome mirror wraith was caught and either destroyed or imprisoned again by his mighty family. Sunny would have one less headache if they did.

Unless Mordret decided to trade away his secrets, of course...

'Damnation!'

The Prince of Nothing, meanwhile, waved his hand dismissively.

"Ah, don't worry so much, Sunless. I am not here to do anything. I just wanted to take a peek at the festivities. No one will notice."

Judging by his confident smile, Mordret was sufficiently certain of that statement. This probably meant that he had acquired at least one potent anti-divination tool. Well… the mere fact that the great and mighty clan Valor had failed to track him down, yet, already hinted at that possibility.

If not for Sunny's random shot in the dark, no one would indeed have noticed the transient reflection.

Mordret looked at him and lingered for a few moments. Then, he said in a pensive tone:

"You know, Sunless… for someone who keeps denying his ties with the great clans, you sure brush sides with them a lot."

Sunny was so outraged that he lost the gift of speech for a second.

"And whose fault is that, you bastard?! If you didn't involve me in your mess, I would have been living happily ever after somewhere else!"

'Well… probably.'

Mordret awkwardly coughed. Then, he regained his composure and said with a bit of reproach:

"I already apologized, didn't I? In any case… complications or not, you should choose your friends carefully, Sunless."

Sunny glared at the reflection for a bit.

"Am I having a déjà vu? I swear I just had this exact conversation with someone else a few minutes ago. You did not steal Seishan's body by any chance, did you?"

Mordret tilted his head a little.

"I don't think so? Uh... who is Seishan?"

Sunny opened his mouth, then frowned.

'No… he wouldn't have.'

The damned lunatic was already being hunted by one great clan. Killing an heiress of another would do him no good.

"An… acquaintance of mine. Never mind about her."

Mordret smiled.

"If you say so. I must say, you do have a lot of interesting acquaintances."

A curious expression appeared on the reflection's face.

"That Changing Star is... rather fascinating. To think that the Immortal Flame clan was able to return to a semblance of its former glory... and with the help of a young Dreamspawn, no less! Maybe I should take her body, instead. What do you think, Sunless?

Should I?"

He was obviously probing to get a reaction out of Sunny, but luck was not on his side. Sunny simply shrugged and said indifferently:

"Be my guest."

It seemed as if he was absolutely disinterested in whether Mordret would kill and replace Nephis or not.

Of course, he wasn't… not really. He just thought that the Prince of Nothing would dearly regret trying to consume Changing Star's soul.

Not only was she a Tyrant, which would make battling her a nightmare, he also suspected that her soul possessed its own formidable defenses.

Nephis had already hinted that the lineage of Sun God strengthened it somehow. But that only accounted for the quantity of her force. There was also the quality… Sunny had a hunch that Mordret would be burning himself alive if he tried to invade her radiant Soul Sea.

'Wouldn't that be a sight to see?'

He glanced at his reflection, then said coldly:

"Is this all you wanted to say? Because if that's it… I have a ball to return to."

Then, Sunny scoffed and added:

"And by the way, didn't you give a very pompous speech about how I should pray to never meet you again, the last time we saw each other? Kind of presumptuous of you to then go ahead and place yourself straight in my sights. In a bathroom, of all places!"

Mordret's smile paled a little.

"Ah, that… I did not forget about that, Sunless. Truth be told, I am still very peeved about what you have done. Come to think of it, maybe I should do something to lessen my frustration. Say, which of your friends do you value the least?"

Sunny's fist slammed in the mirror, shattering it. Mordret laughed, staring at him from the shards. His face… Sunny's face… became distorted by the cracks.

"Oh, Sunless, Sunless… so passionate…"

Sunny stared at the broken mirror for a few moments, then said through gritted teeth:

"I value all my friends, you bastard. Affection is not something you can assign a numerical value to, and then compare which number is bigger… well, you wouldn't know, I guess. Not only do you care

about no one, no one has most likely ever cared about you, either."

He took a step forward and stared directly at his reflection.

"You like to talk big, Mordret, and make it seem as if I should be afraid of you. But that is true the other way around, too. I can be scary when I want to, too. Think long... and think hard... before making me your enemy.

Or you will learn to fear the shadows."

Mordret stopped laughing and looked at him silently for a few long moments. His smile slowly disappeared.

After a few moments of silence, the Prince of Nothing sighed.

"We understand each other, then. Let's not become enemies, Sunless. Crushing you won't bring me any joy."

With that, he disappeared, as if he had never been there. The reflection still looked the same, but the alien presence seemed to be gone from it.

All that remained was a broken, distorted, angry image of Sunny.

He grimaced, and then turned away.

'We'll see who crushes whom, bastard. If time comes…'

Chapter-806: A Dance of Light and Shadow

After returning to the dancing hall, Sunny saw it in a new light. His perception had shifted, making everything seem darker and more dangerous. He had already been apprehensive about the crowd of guests, but now, every one of them looked like a potential threat.

Mordret might have said that he was not planning to do anything and had just come to take a look, but could the banished prince be trusted? As far as Sunny was concerned, the lunatic could have been on his way to publicly assassinate one of his relatives, or slaughter as many as he could, right now.

Much worse, he could be hiding inside of anyone. Every guest was a potential host. Every mundane human, every Awakened, every Master… none of them were beyond suspicion.

Even Saints were not off the list, perhaps.

Sunny suppressed a groan.

'Curse it all…'

There were two carriers of Divine Aspects in the world that had made it their life's goal to destroy the great clan Valor at all costs. And now, both of them were in this building!

Even if nothing happened, the threat alone made him itchy.

The great hall where dozens of beautiful pairs danced suddenly did not look as splendid.

Turning around, Sunny looked at Nephis, lingered for a few moments, and then walked in her direction with steady steps.

As he came close, he offered her a hand and asked...

"Shall we dance?"

Neph looked at him in confusion for a couple of seconds, then shrugged and placed her hand in his.

Together, they walked to the middle of the hall. Sunny put his second hand on her waist, while she put hers on his shoulder. Suddenly, they were extremely close to each other.

Sunny's heart skipped a beat.

…It was in moments like this one that he missed having two.

Without wasting any time, Sunny led Neph into a dance. It wasn't too hard… he just had to listen to the music and repeat what the other dancers were doing. With his proficiency in Shadow Dance, understanding the logic and cadence of their movements was incredibly easy for him.

Although Sunny was dancing for the first time in his life, he looked more comfortable and adept at it than most of the guests. Changing Star seemed like a natural, too. Perhaps it was due to her own combat mastery, or perhaps she had received lessons as an heiress of a Legacy clan. In any case, almost instantly after they started the dance, the pair caught a lot of admiring stares.

Sunny did not care. He had much bigger problems on his mind.

Trying to not let her closeness affect him too much and failing at it, he waited for a bit and gathered his thoughts. Finally, Sunny said, his voice drowned by the music and the hum of the great hall:

"I've been meaning to ask…"

The time to hide his head in the sand was over.

Nephis silently raised an eyebrow, prompting him to continue.

"...What, exactly, are you planning to do today? You know that Valor won't take no for an answer. They want to have all of us, but if that is

not possible, they'll only settle for getting at least one. That way, they'll be assured that the rest of us won't join a rival faction. So… which one of us is going to become a retainer of the great clan Valor?"

Changing Star lingered for a while, allowing him to lead her in the dance. Her hand rested easily on his shoulder.

After a few steps, she suddenly asked:

"You don't really understand, do you?"

Sunny did not frown, but his eyes suddenly became darker.

"I don't? What is it that you think I don't understand?"

A somber expression slowly appeared on her face.

"Valor and Song are not rival factions, Sunny. They're warcamps."

As they spun under the light of beautiful chandeliers, she leaned even closer and said:

"I've studied the facts for a long time after returning to the waking world. The ripples caused by the death of Saint Cormac, the subtle machinations that happen in the darkness, the growing imbalance of power between Bastion and Ravenheart… even the timing of Seishan challenging the Second Nightmare. It all paints a clear picture."

A slight scowl appeared on Sunny's face.

"What are you trying to say?"

Nephis sighed.

"I am trying to make you see that the conflict between the great clans has grown into something more than mere disagreement. They are at war… or rather, they will be soon."

Sunny felt her hand growing tense in his own.

"War? Wait… what does a war between great clans even look like?"

Changing Star shook her head.

"Something like that has never happened before. So… who knows? Three things are certain, however. It will be hidden. It will be bloody. It will claim the lives of many people."

He suddenly felt cold.

'Damned Legacies… Antarctica is about to fall, and they choose that exact moment to lunge at each other's throats! Bastards!'

Sunny remained silent for several steps, and then looked at Nephis intently:

"Alright. But what does it have to do with us?"

She suddenly gripped his shoulder tighter and met his gaze. Cold, dangerous white sparks were dancing in her eyes.

"Don't you see? It has everything to do with us."

Sunny stopped himself from snarling.

"I don't! Nephis… whether the great clans are embroiled into a secret war or not does not change anything. You are still too small and weak to openly oppose them. Please, tell me that you understand that. You were the one who said that the… that these people are too strong. That their power is too absolute."

Changing Star stared at him for a while, her face turning impassive. After a few moments of silence, she said:

"I remember. I understand."

She looked down, and then added:

"Which is why… which is why the answer to your question might not be what you want to hear, Sunny. You asked me which one of us will become a member of the great clan."

Nephis raised her head and looked him straight in the eyes. Then, she said evenly:

"It's me. I will join Valor."

Chapter-807: From Within

When Sunny heard what Nephis had to say, he almost stepped on her foot. His rhythm was broken, making it difficult to remain in the flow of the dance. He narrowly avoided stumbling, regained his composure, and threw a burning gaze at her.

"What?"

Her expression did not change.

"You heard me."

Sunny opened his mouth, lingered for a moment, then simply turned around and pulled her by the hand. Despite the fact that many people stared at this sudden turn of events, he cut through the dancing guests, forcing Neph to follow. They left the middle of the great hall, then disappeared from the central chamber entirely.

Finding himself in a corridor that ran along the length of the dancing hall, Sunny walked swiftly, searching for an empty room. Eventually, he had to settle for a kitchen of sorts. Several chefs and their assistants were busy preparing more refreshments for the guests of the ball… or rather, they had been.

Even before Sunny entered the room, the shadows inside suddenly moved and grew darker, startling the kitchen staff. Throwing a heavy glance at them, he said in an even voice:

"Leave."

The chefs stared at the two Masters in confusion for a couple of moments, then silently backed away and left through a different door, their faces pale.

Sunny and Nephis were left alone.

He waited for a bit, then let go of her hand and outstretched his own. A strange flute carved of emerald bone appeared in it from a swirl of sparks. Sunny brought it to his lips and blew into the hole.

Surprisingly, no sound came out of the flute. Instead, it seemed to have absorbed all sounds, enveloping them in a cone of silence. Now, no one would have been able to listen in on their conversations.

Sunny's shadows also kept watch outside the kitchen, just to make sure.

Finally, he turned to Nephis and snarled:

"You? Join Valor? What… what the hell?!"

Changing Star sighed, then took a step back and leaned on the wall. Then, she spoke in her usual calm, steady voice:

"Why are you so surprised?"

Sunny stared at her in stunned silence. Then, he shook his head.

"What about your great goals? After all the crazy stunts you pulled, after all that talk about wishing to bring the three ghouls to their knees and destroy them… you are just going to join them?"

Neph's eyes grew somber.

"My plans did not change, Sunny."

He frowned.

"So you are going to destroy Valor, but you are also going to become one of their own. Don't you see the contradiction?"

She looked at him intensely, then said with boiling, but suppressed emotion in her voice:

"There is no contradiction. On the contrary, this is the only way I can advance my goals."

Nephis took a step forward and pierced him with a searing gaze.

"The Sovereigns are, indeed, too strong. Their power is, indeed, too fearsome. And I am truly too weak to contend with them… for now. However, they will fall by my hand, in the end. Did you hope that two years of being lost in the Dream Realm would have dulled my resolve? Did you think that I would give up?"

Sunny shook his head with a dark expression.

Changing Star smiled.

"No… my resolve was only made sharper. I spent so many days, so many nights thinking about how to move forward and bring these old monsters down. It was not too hard to realize that if my own strength is not enough, I have to borrow it from someone else. Whose strength should I borrow, then? Ah, but that is so obvious.

If the Sovereigns are so powerful, why would I not use their own power to destroy them?"

Sunny blinked slowly.

"So… divide and conquer? This is your great plan?"

Nephis shrugged.

"They are already divided. I have to thank you for that, by the way. Although the conflict between Valor and Song had been brewing for a long time, the sudden appearance of the Dreamer Army made it worse. But most of all, the death of Saint Cormac and the return of the banished Prince of War was what finally made it intolerable for the great clans."

He scowled.

"What? What does Mordret have to do with any of this?"

Changing Star smiled darkly.

"He is in the same position as me. Which means that he will do the same thing as me. He would have sought out a way to use one of the Sovereigns against the other, too."

Sunny's eyes widened.

Mordret had a vendetta against his two fathers… both the one who had spawned him and the one who had raised him. That left only…

"Don't tell me… is that lunatic going to join forces with the Song clan?"

Nephis nodded with satisfaction.

"I would be surprised if he did not already. And if I can come to that conclusion, then that means that Valor knows, as well. Why do you think the strife between the two great clans has suddenly grown so dire? Valor has fewer Saints. Thanks to Seishan, Valor has fewer promising Awakened seeds. And now, one of their most formidable creations has joined hands with the adversary.

How do you think they'll react?"

Sunny looked at her grimly.

"...Not well."

Changing Star lingered for a few moments, then nodded.

"But that is what puts me in a unique position. Yes, I am small and weak. Yes, my individual strength is more or less insignificant. However, because of how disadvantaged the great clan Valor is… they desperately need me. My value in this situation is disproportionate to what it would have been otherwise.

Which is why they are ready to put aside their desire to see me dead, and are willing to embrace me instead."

Sunny scoffed.

"That is all great. But why would you want to embrace them, too? Wouldn't it be better to stay away and watch as the two great clans maul each other, then swoop in and finish off the weakened victor?"

Nephis shook her head.

"No matter how much one of the great clans weakens, its armor would still be too strong and impenetrable for me to break through it."

He raised an eyebrow.

"So, what?"

Changing Star looked at him, cold white flames dancing in her eyes.

"So I won't try to. Instead, I'm going to bypass the armor and attack them from within."

Chapter-808: A Long-Awaited Conversation

Sunny grimaced.

What Nephis had said made sense… as much as the word "sense" could be applied to her.

Changing Star wanted to destroy the Nightmare Spell, and the Sovereigns were in her way. Just like Gunlaug, the ruthless tyrant of the Bright Castle, they had seemingly given up on pursuing liberation from the Spell, and instead settled for the great power that it had already bestowed upon them.

What was worse, they were holding others back from rising high enough to threaten their position… at least that was how it looked from below. Perhaps the Sovereigns had other reasons for their despotism and inaction, but Sunny had no way of knowing if they did.

Not that it mattered to Nephis. To her, they were simply an obstacle that had to be destroyed. Her personal desire to avenge the Immortal Flame clan and bring retribution to those who had betrayed her father only made the task sweeter.

However, her enemies were much too strong. She would only be able to challenge them if she became Supreme herself, but the path to Supremacy was guarded by the very people she needed to destroy. Faced with this dead end, she had decided to use the Sovereigns' own power to vanquish them.

She also wanted to infiltrate the ranks of her enemy and put herself in the position to attack one of the great clans from within, when the time came.

Sunny let out a heavy sigh.

"So, let me get this straight. You are going to join Clan Valor, fight for them until Clan Song is destroyed to earn Anvil's trust, then turn your blade against him?"

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"More or less. Why?"

He rubbed his face.

"This is a terrible plan! There are more holes in this plan than in Swiss cheese… whoever Swi is. Who says that Valor will win this war? Who says that Anvil will ever treat you as anything but a latent threat? Do you think that he is a fool? Surely, he knows how much you have to hate his guts!"

Changing Star looked at him calmly.

"I do. I say who wins. I say whether he trusts me or not. It all depends on me, does it not? If I want the great Song clan to fall, I have to make sure that it falls. If I want to win Anvil's favor, I have to make sure that he favors me.

I am not a passive observer in this, Sunny. I have agency to shape the future into what I want it to be… or at least try to. Sure, the chances of success are poor. But when were the odds ever on our side?"

Sunny scoffed, then shook his head.

"I'll give you that. Our luck was always terrible. However, there is a difference between being thrown into overwhelming danger against your will and deciding to put yourself at risk of your own volition. Unlike before, we don't have to be underdogs. You are choosing this!"

Nephis shook her head, as well.

"That is where you are wrong, Sunny. Do you really think that I have any choice? Do you think that I can turn back now? That the Sovereigns will ever let me be? No… it is too late for that. It is as you said, Valor are determined to have their pound of flesh.

All I can choose is where they sink their teeth."

He glared at her for a few moments, then spat:

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

Looking at him, Changing Star frowned.

"What?"

Sunny took a step forward.

"Me! You are forgetting me! I have a say in this too, goddammit!"

She remained silent for a while. Eventually, Nephis said:

"I am not forcing you to do anything. You don't have to follow me to Valor if you don't wish to."

A crooked smile appeared on his face.

"Oh, great! But is this really true? There is a certain bond between us, after all. I am only free to do as I wish until you decide otherwise. Who knows if your mood will change one day?"

Neph stared at him for a few long seconds. Then, she sighed and crossed her arms.

"Ah, so this is what it's all about."

Sunny gritted his teeth, then said slowly:

"Since we are talking about it, let's talk. This conversation was a long time coming. So, Nephis, tell me… what are you going to do with your power over me?"

Her face remained impassive. Neph looked at him coldly for a moment, and then said:

"...Nothing. I will never order you to do something for me, ever again."

Sunny was already opening his mouth to retort before she finished

speaking, but then froze. He stood still for a few moments, then let out a long breath.

"Well… good. Because if you ever tried, one of us would have died. That is not a threat, just a fact."

Suddenly, white sparks ignited in Changing Star's eyes. She leaned forward slightly and said, her voice full of barely suppressed emotion:

"And do you know why?"

Suddenly feeling a sense of unease, Sunny frowned.

"No, I can't say that I do. Why?"

She took a step forward and stopped in front of him, almost as close as they had been during their dance. Her face was still, but her eyes were full of searing flame.

"...Because I don't need anyone to follow me against their will. I don't need a magical collar to make people serve me. I don't need slaves. That is not enough for me, Sunny. Why should I settle for submission when I can have loyalty? People who will follow me, serve me, and obey me will do so because that is their most ardent desire.

They will do so with a smile. If I ever want to make you mine, Sunny, you will become mine — not because you were forced to, but because you would want to. That... is also a fact."

He stared at her for a few moments, startled by the sudden intensity of her words. Then, a stubborn expression appeared on his face:

"Aren't you too full of yourself? Who do you think you are, to decide what I want?"

Nephis looked at him, then turned away and sighed.

"I am... I am the person who knows you best in the world, Sunny. Two worlds, even."

She lingered for a few moments, and then added quietly:

"As I said, I will never force you to do anything. But whether you like it or not, our fates are intertwined. And that bond has nothing to do with your Innate Ability. In truth, they were entangled the moment we met, in front of the Academy gates. We just did not know it yet. You can't escape it."

'Can't… escape… fate?'

Sunny looked at Nephis for a long time, and then smiled darkly.

"Watch me."

With that, he dismissed the bone flute, turned around, and left the kitchen.

Entering the corridor, Sunny walked away. His nostrils were flaring, and his face was contorted by an expression of anger.

As he walked, he took out his communicator and dialed a familiar number.

After some time, a female voice resounded from the speaker:

"Sunny? What a nice surprise. It's good to hear from you."

He hesitated for a few moments, and then took a deep breath.

Then, Sunny smiled and answered in a friendly tone:

"Master Jet? Hey… I have a question for you."

He paused for a second, and then asked:

"...How cold is it in Antarctica?"

Chapter-809: True Strength

Sunny was riled and angry. Once again, talking to Nephis made him lose his sense of balance.

…However, the decision he made was not an emotional one.

He had enough composure to keep a clear head even while being affected by seething feelings. Years of battles and dire conflicts had taught him how to keep a cool head.

So, his choice was cold and calculated.

Two things had become clear during the conversation.

The first one was very simple — Nephis intended to join the great clan Valor, while Sunny didn't want to have anything to do with it.

It was one thing to become a retainer of a powerful and prosperous clan in order to make use of its vast knowledge, arsenal, and resources. Despite his strong desire to remain independent, Sunny had entertained the idea himself.

However, it was a completely different thing to join an embattled clan that was on the verge of entering a destructive and bloody war against a similarly fearsome adversary. To add insult to injury, Valor was on the losing end of the equation. Their enemy, the great clan Song, held all the advantages.

And even worse than that was the idea of joining a warring faction with conscious plans of betraying it further down the line. Nephis was more than willing to eventually face not one, but both great clans in battle.

She had her goals and conviction, but Sunny just wanted to be left alone. He saw no reason to follow her into the dragon's maw. More

than that, with her joining Valor, the initial condition that had forced him into the damned negotiations in the first place was resolved.

Since Valor was willing to settle for recruiting just one member of the cohort, and Changing Star was willing to play the role of the recruit, then why the hell would he follow suit?

In short, despite all the contradictory feelings raging in Sunny's heart, the situation was rather straightforward. There was no compelling reason for him to enter into service of the great clan, but there was a convenient opportunity for him to take a step back and walk away. He would be a fool not to use it.

…Of course, in reality, things were a bit more complicated.

What Changing Star had said might have angered him, but she was not wrong. Their fates did, indeed, seem to be intertwined.

From being born in the same year to receiving Divine and complementing Aspects, from meeting at the gates of the Academy to being sent to the same small patch of the Forgotten Shore… whether by coincidence or not, their connection went far beyond the tether of the Shadow Bond.

Sunny had a strong suspicion that his intrinsic Attribute, [Fated], had a lot to do with placing Nephis in his path. And as much as Sunny wished to defy fate, he was not arrogant enough to think that he was ready to break its chains just yet.

He could already see how, no matter what he did, he would not be able to escape colliding against Changing Star again. She had been right when she said that escaping the notice of the great clans entirely was impossible for them — more so for her, but also true for Sunny.

With his meteoric rise, his Special Strategic Asset designation, and his connection to both Nephis and Mordret — not to mention Shadow God and Weaver — coming into contact with the Sovereigns and their Domains was just a matter of time. Even if Neph joined Valor and Sunny did not, they would most likely meet again soon enough.

The question, then, was more about the nature of their future relationship than whether it would exist or not.

So… what could Sunny do to shape it into something that had a semblance of corresponding to his desires?

Perhaps the most important revelation that had resulted from their conversation was the nature of Neph's intentions toward Sunny and her power over him.

Sunny had spent several weeks burying his head in the sand and avoiding this pivotal discussion. As the result, those weeks had been… perhaps some of the nicest in his life. However, his actions had also caused everything to blow up in his face in the end.

Nephis had said in no uncertain terms that she had no intention of ever issuing another order to him. Not because of any moral consideration… but simply because it was beneath her.

Changing Star had no need for an unwilling slave. She disdained the idea of forcing anyone to obey her. Instead, she planned to have people follow her of their own free will. Instead of enslaving anyone, she preferred to have people enslave and bind themselves by their desire to serve her.

Neph had told him that she would never force him to do anything. But she also seemed to be certain that he would follow her willingly, in the end.

And that, to Sunny, was the core problem of the dynamic between them.

He believed that Nephis valued him. She even respected him. But despite all that, she still saw him as a follower.

…And a follower could never be an equal.

'Damn it.'

Worst of all, her stance was not baseless.

Sunny couldn't help but think back to his conversation with Effie. The

huntress had told him once that he would never be stronger than Changing Star, because Changing Star had something that he lacked.

Conviction.

Sunny had been tempted to dismiss her well-meant, but biting remark. However, he could not dismiss the fact that despite all his desperate attempts, despite him almost killing himself several times to catch up to Nephis, there was still a noticeable gap in power and accomplishment between them.

He did not think that he lacked determination. Gods knew that very few people have pushed themselves as hard, and endured as much, as he had.

But his last conversation with Changing Star had finally given Sunny an inkling of what it was exactly that he lacked.

As far as Sunny saw it, his determination was no less intense than Neph's. However, all his goals were internal. All he did was react to things. He did not strive to reach anything, instead, he only strived to avoid and get away from things. Get away from danger, from poverty, from fate itself… he had always been reactive.

Neph, on the contrary, had always been active. She had always pursued a goal that was larger than herself. As the result, her conviction pushed her forward like an external force, while Sunny was stuck trying to pull himself up with nothing propelling him forward.

That was why he was destined to always lag behind. Selfish desire to attain material wealth and live free would never be able to push him as hard and as far as Changing Star's insane and unattainable dream was pushing her.

…At least that was his current thinking.

Maybe it was all senseless crap.

In any case, Sunny was determined to try and find an equally powerful motivation. Either it would help him, or it would not… however, no matter what happened, he was not satisfied being seen

as a valued follower instead of an equal. He was still determined to grow stronger, much stronger, and if conviction was what it took to speed up his progress, he was willing to give it a try.

Where was one supposed to find conviction, though?

Well… Sunny was pretty sure that attempting to save hundreds of millions of people in Antarctica was a good place to start.

That was where he was going to go in search of true strength.

Chapter-810: Secret Gift

A couple of days later, Sunny was staring at his living room with a strange expression on his face.

Everything had already been settled. He was leaving on another long expedition… this time, in the waking world instead of the Dream Realm. Somehow, it promised to be even more of a nightmare.

'Well, whatever.'

High matters of fate and conviction aside, Antarctica was still a perfect place for him to grow stronger. Now that Sunny was a Master, it was not as easy for him to gather shadow fragments. Only Fallen Nightmare Creatures and those more powerful would do.

Finding swarms of them was a task in and of itself, and the Southern Quadrant that was about to be devoured by an endless horde of abominations offered a perfect opportunity. Not only would he be able to work toward becoming a Tyrant, test his mettle, and sharpen his skill, there would also be plenty of soul shards for him to collect, which he needed to continue practicing weaving.

So, Sunny was supposed to be gathering his things and preparing to leave.

The thing was… that he had already done that before the ball, just in case he would have to run away in haste. Sunny had prepared so thoroughly that he could just walk out of the door and disappear right now.

'Huh. Weird.'

He sighed and then checked the refrigerator again, just to make sure that he did not leave anything that could spoil there.

'Nope, all clean.'

His communicator vibrated, then displayed a notification. The title of a network article appeared in view:

"Breaking news! A young hero is adopted by the brother-in-arms of her late father. Changing Star joins hands with the great clan Valor!"

The corner of his mouth twitched.

At that moment, the door opened, letting in Effie and Kai. The two looked around, noticing the condition of the house. A few moments later, the huntress shook her head.

"Damn… you are really leaving?"

Sunny closed the refrigerator, then walked over and patted her on the shoulder.

"I am."

Effie stared at him for a couple of moments, then sighed.

"And you're still not going to tell us where?"

He smiled.

"Ah, I'm not at liberty to say. Don't worry, though. You'll probably learn in about a month."

She blinked.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Sunny waved a hand.

"It just means that you'll know soon."

Effie remained silent for a few moments, then shrugged with irritation.

"Well, alright. Be that way, then."

Sunny hesitated for a bit. Finally, he asked:

"What about you? And… the others?"

This time, it was Kai who answered:

"You must have already seen the news. It hasn't been officially announced yet, but a thing like that is hard to keep secret. Nephis is being adopted by Clan Valor. Cassie and the Fire Keepers will follow her as retainers. As for Effie and I… well, to be honest, we haven't decided yet."

Sunny glanced at his friends with a somber expression.

"What are you guys thinking?"

Effie leaned on the wall and grimaced.

"Ah, I don't know. I was always thinking about becoming a Master, but weirdly, I never really thought about what I would do after. Those pompous Valor folks rub me the wrong way, but they do have a lot to offer. Plus, pretty much everyone I know is with them now."

Kai smiled weakly.

"I am even more lost. I didn't even have thoughts of becoming a Master. Now that I am… I want to do some good, I guess. It's just hard to determine what is the best way to do it."

Sunny lingered for a few moments. A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

"Well… don't be in a rush to make a decision. Wait for April, at least."

It was February right now. By April, the collapse of Antarctica would be slowly starting, and the government would have already announced voluntary mobilization. Sunny had wanted to tell his friends about the approaching disaster, but Master Jet insisted on keeping it confidential, for now.

He was not sure that Effie and Kai would want to go there, anyway.

The two of them, meanwhile, glanced at each other. Then, Kai cautiously asked:

"Does it have anything to do with your sudden departure?"

Sunny nodded.

"It does. Don't ask anything else, though, or you'll put me in an awkward position."

Neither of them did, respecting his request.

A strange silence settled between them. Finally, Sunny scoffed.

"What are you guys doing? It's not like we're saying goodbye. I'm still anchored at the Ivory Tower, you fools. I can always hop in the Dream Realm and meet you there."

Kai scratched the back of his head.

"Oh… yeah, true! I didn't think about that."

Sunny shook his head.

"Same goes for Nephis and Cassie, since they're not planning to move to Bastion yet. We might not be an active cohort anymore, but we're still a big, dysfunctional family of sorts. I can guarantee that you won't miss me. In fact, you'll probably wish that I appeared in front of your faces less often."

He grinned and then gestured to the door.

"In any case, thanks for dropping by, but now I really have to go. I'm on a bit of a schedule."

He walked them outside, then watched as they boarded a PTV and left. There were no emotional goodbyes, since what he had said was true. They would all be seeing each other in the Dream Realm often, no matter where they were in the waking world.

So… that meant that he had one last thing to do.

Sunny sealed the house by inputting a security code into the lock panel, looked at it one last time, and walked to one of the neighboring buildings. He took out his communicator, sent a short message, and then waited for a bit.

A minute later, a slightly surprised teenage girl walked out onto the porch, wearing cozy home clothes.

"Sunny? Uh… why are you here? We're not supposed to have a lesson today?"

He smiled, and then pointed to the backpack that hung from his shoulder.

"Hey, Rain. I just came by to say that I'll be going away again. This time, it might take a bit longer for me to return."

Her expression subtly changed.

"Oh."

She remained silent for a while, then asked in a guarded, tentative voice:

"Is… is it going to be dangerous again?"

Sunny shrugged with a carefree expression.

"Dangerous? Well, I guess. I'm pretty certain that I can handle it, though. I'm a pretty tough guy. So, don't worry."

He sighed, and then added:

"Plus, I am staying in the real world this time. You can message me whenever. The network connection is going to be patchy where I'm going, so I might not be able to answer immediately. I will eventually, though. That's a promise."

Finally, she relaxed a little.

"Really? That's great!"

He nodded. After hesitating for a few moments, Sunny took a step closer and said:

"...You are going to turn sixteen in a couple of months, Rain. That means that you have to be ready. You might be chosen by the Spell, or you might not. In any case, I think that you are sufficiently prepared."

He fell silent for a bit, and then added:

"I taught you as much as I could. The rest depends on you. Keep practicing with your sword. Keep sharpening your mind, as well. Most importantly, keep working on your mentality."

Rain looked at him and nodded seriously.

"I will."

…She did not notice that something strange had happened in the spot where their shadows intersected. A massive, dark silhouette that resembled a stygian serpent flowed from Sunny's shadow, then hid itself in hers.

Sunny had invoked one of Soul Serpents Abilities.

[Grace of Shadows] Ability Description: "The master of the Soul Serpent can grace another with the trust and companionship of their Shadow Guide. One should be careful whom they bestow with their grace; entrusting others with the loyalty of Shadows is the same as sharing one's soul, and thus should not be offered lightly."

He could not give Rain any Memories. Neither could he give her any Echoes. Rain did not possess an Aspect or a soul core to encompass them. She certainly did not possess a shadow core to receive one of his Shadows.

But Serpent was different. [Grace of Shadows] allowed it to accompany anyone who had a shadow, including a mundane human. So, Sunny transferred Serpent to Rain and commanded it to hide itself unless the girl was in mortal danger.

With the help of an Ascended Devil, she would be able to survive

anything.

Sunny knew that by providing Rain with his handicap, he might have been stunting her own growth. But he did not care. His sister did not have to grow strong, or die. He was more than capable of being strong for the both of them.

Looking at her, he smiled.

"Well, anyway. Don't be a stranger. If you need advice, just message me. You're my only student, after all, so if you suddenly die, my reputation will be ruined. No one will ever hire me as a tutor again!"

Rain glared at him for a moment, then scoffed.

"Why would I die? I'm too smart for that. You, however… make sure not to die yourself. I won't be able to brag that my tutor is a Master if you're dead."

Sunny grinned, then waved at her and turned away.

It was time to leave the city where he had grown up, both for the first time and once again.

Chapter-811: Train Ride

Sunny had never thought that he would leave the city one day. He had barely ever thought that there was anything beyond the city, actually. More than that, for him, the city proper itself had always seemed like an alien land. His whole world used to start and end with the outskirts.

Tens of millions of people who lived in the outskirts had a very special relationship with the wilderness beyond. They spent their lives much closer to it than real citizens, and were not separated from it by the tall barrier walls that encompassed powerful air filters. On one hand, it made them more attuned to the existence of the outside.

On the other hand, they associated the outside with death, disease, and starvation on a much more visceral level. To them, the wilderness meant death in a very practical sense of the word, as opposed to distant and purely theoretical.

That was why Sunny felt very weird as he stared at the train that was supposed to take him to the rendezvous point where Master Jet was supposed to to meet him.

The long-range transcontinental train did not look anything like the light intracity ones Sunny was familiar with. It resembled a massive, heavily armored metal beast that stretched for hundreds and hundreds of meters, its long body composed of various bulky segments.

There were passenger carriages, massive cargo carriages, various utility carriages, and even a mobile repair and fabrication unit capable of restoring damaged sections of the railway should the train encounter any hindrances on the way. Rows of large-caliber turret, automated cannons, and gun emplacements rose from the roof, manned by the railroad technicians and security officers.

It was a fearsome, moving fortress. Anything less would not have been reliably safe, considering that the government rarely paid attention to the Nightmare Gates that opened away from population centers.

Sunny studied the train curiously for a while, then went ahead and found the carriage he was assigned to.

As a Master, he was entitled to ride in the lavishly furnished car meant for high-ranking citizens, government officials, and members of Legacy clans. He also got a whole cabin to himself. The cabin was comparable in size to his room at the Academy, but much better stocked and equipped.

Sunny threw his backpack on a shelf and sat down near the window, enjoying the softness of an expensive-looking armchair. A strange expression appeared on his face.

'Well… as far as wars go, this one is weirdly opulent so far.'

Of course, he was sure that these luxurious conditions would not last long.

No one had bothered him until the train started to move, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Soon, the familiar sights of the city and the outskirts flew by, and the great metal beast finally escaped into the wilderness.

Sunny felt a solemn mood overcome his senses. Despite spending years of his life in the much more wild and untouched reaches of the Dream Realm, he somehow felt as if he was stepping outside human civilization for the first time. He held his breath as the various human-built structures disappeared behind.

However, the actual landscape of his world did not make any impression on him. It was just sort of… boring.

The wild expanse of the Northern Quadrant mostly looked like a desolate, empty place. It was almost entirely made out of mud and snow. Whatever flora still clung to life in the barren soil looked sickly and dull. The sky was heavy and grey, and the air was slightly hazy.

Apart from occasional skeletal carcasses of dead Nightmare Creatures or rusty wrecks left behind from the times of human wars, there was nothing much to look at.

Sunny sighed.

'What a waste…'

The waking world was not entirely uninhabitable, but it was certainly inhospitable to the species that had once populated its every corner.

Maybe Effie had been right, back when they spoke in the ruined cathedral of the Dark City.

He stared through the window for some time, then stood up and walked to a narrow bed, deciding to go to sleep early. This was probably going to be his last opportunity to rest well for a long, long time. It would have been a shame to let the opportunity go.

Burying his face in a soft pillow, Sunny closed his eyes and soon fell asleep.

...At some point during the night, he was awakened by strange vibrations spreading through the frame of the train. Looking up, he saw pale flashes of light outside the window and heard distant, muffled pounding.

The turrets on the locomotive and front carriages of the train were firing.

Since none of his shadows, which were standing watch, seemed alarmed, Sunny sighed, turned on his other side, and closed his eyes again. Soon, he was back to sleep.

…He dreamt of ice and darkness.

In the morning, the train was moving forward as if nothing had happened. Sunny had expected as much, so he wasn't surprised. After freshening up in the small bathroom attached to the cabin, he walked over to the dining car and had a scrumptious breakfast. The cooking could not compete with the Instructor's Cafeteria at the Academy, of course, but it was decent enough.

As he ate, Sunny studied the other people present in the carriage. Most of them were government officers and had a military bearing. A few of them were Awakened, and gave him respectful nods. Even though nothing about Sunny revealed that he was a Master, they were able to sense it.

Most of these people were probably traveling south for the same reason that he was. They were going to Antarctica, as well, so the mood in the dining car was somber. No one talked very much, and those who did kept their voices low.

Sunny doubted that all the participants of the massive operation knew the full scope of the disaster that was approaching the Southern Quadrant. In fact, he was willing to bet that very few were as well-informed as he was. More than that, none of them probably had as much battle experience as he had.

If they understood the real horror of what was about to come, they wouldn't be so calm.

He did not really know how to feel about that.

The next morning, the armored train finally reached its destination.

Sunny disembarked from the lavish carriage and froze for a moment, staring at the endless grey expanse of restless waves.

In front of him...

Was the sea.

Chapter-812: Naval Convoy

As Sunny already knew, water was the optimal way of transporting cargo — and people — across vast distances. Human civilization had always made use of this property to its benefit.

The earliest paths of trade and cultural exchange, and therefore progress, were situated along great rivers, and later shifted to seas and oceans. That had led to many prominent civilization centers being situated along various coasts.

However, humanity had regretted that fact dearly when the water slowly crawled forward and devoured all those beautiful, important cities. Even worse, once the Nightmare Spell appeared, seas and ocean became infested by terrifying Nightmare Creatures.

For that reason, very few populous settlements were situated near water. The further inland they were, the better. Humans still needed to make use of the convenience that only the ocean could provide, though. For that reason, there were many fortified ports in each Quadrant.

Sunny was looking at one such port.

Even after experiencing the dread and grandeur of the Forgotten Shore and the Chained Isles, he could not help but feel a bit of awe. The port itself looked like an unassailable fortress, with tall walls rising from the water and various fortifications protruding far into the bleak waves.

Colossal cannons were aimed at the horizon, ready to bring down hell on anything that would dare to approach the crowded harbor. Various spelltech defensive measures brimmed with energy. He had no doubt that even more were hidden underwater.

…Much more impressive than the port itself, however, were the

ships.

Sunny froze when he saw them.

Around forty metal leviathans were anchored along the shore, each more than a kilometer long and as tall as a castle. Their hulls bore such thick and heavy armor that it seemed strange for these mountains of steel to stay afloat. Some seemed shiny and new, but most bore deep, giant, ugly scars. Many armor plates were bent and corroded, while some were deformed by some unknown titanic blows.

Each ship possessed a plethora of armaments, ranging from heavy artillery cannons to rapid fire anti-air guns and snub-nosed mortars. Rows of rockets, missiles, and torpedoes could be seen in the hidden nests. The main cannons seemed especially fearsome, most of them resembling oversized railguns that stretched the whole lengths of the vessels.

Each of the railguns was capable of propelling a heavy kinetic round with such ferocious speed that barely any human structure would have been able to survive the impact. Maybe not even a whole district would.

The ships rested on the water like slumbering giants. Looking at them, Sunny couldn't help but shiver.

Humanity was accustomed to regarding the Awakened as their most deadly weapon, so it was easy to forget how mighty and destructive mundane people could be with the help of the right technology.

…Sadly, the technology grew less and less reliable against Nightmare Creatures of higher Ranks.

Fallen abominations could more or less shrug off the most devastating of bombardments, while Corrupted ones were capable of surviving nuclear blasts. Science couldn't explain the principles at work in these instances, but plenty of empirical evidence had been gathered, to ruinous results, during the early days of the Nightmare Spell.

So, despite how impressive the forty steel leviathans looked, Sunny knew that the ships alone were not enough to brave the ocean. Unless they were complimented by Awakened fighters and guided by a Nightwalker navigator, even these floating juggernauts weren't capable of surviving the journey to a different Quadrant.

Still, Sunny couldn't help but admire the silent majesty of them.

'One thing is certain… that train is nothing, as it turns out.'

As he stared at the fleet, a familiar voice suddenly called out to him:

"Hey, Sunny! Welcome to our small port."

He turned his head slowly.

Master Jet had not changed much. She was still the same — confident, beautiful, with raven black hair and cold, icy blue eyes. Her usual uniform was gone, though, replaced by a deep blue military trench coat.

There was a satisfied smile on her lips.

The crowd of people parted as she walked closer and glanced at the anchored ships.

"Impressive, aren't they?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then nodded.

"Yeah… now that I see them, I am starting to understand how we are going to evacuate eight hundred million people from Antarctica."

Soul Reaper shook her head.

"Don't be so sure. This is just one of the several convoys that is going to sail to the Southern Quadrant. They are going to deliver the First Evacuation Army to Antarctica, load up a few millions of refugees, and sail back. If everything goes well, by the time the ships return, the mobilization would have already started.

The fleets will bring us reinforcements, take more civilians aboard…

and repeat the process as many times as it takes."

She sighed.

"Of course, there's more or less zero chance that everything will go well. Even if it does, it will take us at least a year to gather everyone… if we are still alive by then. Who knows, maybe we will be all overwhelmed and devoured by abominations in the first few months."

Sunny glanced sideways at her, his expression bleak.

"...You really know how to raise morale, you know?"

Master Jet grinned:

"Ah, don't be so serious. In any case, I am really glad that you decided to join the party, Sunny. I really need someone who I can trust by my side. Don't get me wrong, my other subordinates are all honorable and accomplished warriors… but they're not you."

He blinked a couple of times.

"I didn't know I was so special."

She looked at him, then shrugged and started walking away, prompting Sunny to follow.

"It takes a certain kind of person to face the very depths of despair, and still continue to fight. You are one such person, Sunny."

Soul Reaper glanced at him, then added in a voice that was devoid of any humor:

"...And we will all experience a lot of despair in the coming months. I have a feeling."

Chapter-813: First Evacuation Army

Master Jet led him to an armored military PTV that stood a few meters away from the crowded platform. It seemed that vehicle access to this part of the station was heavily restricted, but she paid it no attention. Apparently, her rank and status trumped some of the rules.

The PTV itself was very different from the civilian models Sunny was accustomed to, as well as the heavier police cruiser he had ridden on occasion in the past. It was much more robust and angular, weighted down by several layers of composite armor, and entirely grounded. Even if the vehicle possessed limited levitation ability, it was perfectly capable of traversing natural terrain on its own.

As they entered the cabin, towering humanoid loader robots moved in to unload cargo from the train, piloted by servicemen who could be seen in the open cockpits. The crude exoskeleton platforms were devoid of armor and failed to reach the smoothness of motion, scale, and sophistication of their military siblings, but were more than enough to perform various labor-intensive utility tasks.

The PTV roared to life, startling Sunny. It seemed that the distinctions from civilian models were even more pronounced below the surface. The systems propelling the vehicle forward were entirely different, producing much more noise and vibrations, but also raw power. The PTV shot forward, narrowly avoiding several barriers before reaching the primitive cement road that led to the port.

As they came closer and closer to the naval fortress, Sunny was able to study the swarm of activity boiling all around it.

Currently, the port became a staging ground for a much greater force than it was designed to accommodate. Thousands upon thousands of

government servants and soldiers were busy with frantic preparations for the approaching deployment.

Numerous recently assembled prefab buildings stood in neat squares, some meant to provide the personnel of the First Evacuation Army with a temporary place to live, some serving as storage depots, production hubs, training facilities, field hospitals, and so on.

A lot of heavy machinery was constantly moving between these squares, either transporting cargo or participating in the disassembly of various structures. Despite the impressive scope of the military camp, its makeshift and transient nature was apparent to the naked eye.

The army was already busy deconstructing many of the buildings in order to move their components to the holds of the forty battleships.

Thousands of humans swarmed the camp like ants. Sunny saw a lot of non-combatant servicemen hurrying to accomplish their tasks, as well as plenty of soldiers busy with training exercises and drills. Some of them were Awakened, but most were mundane humans.

There were all types of specialist units in view — engineering corps, mechanized infantry that moved around in fearsome exoskeleton armor suits, artillery vehicle operators, and many more that Sunny could not name. He even saw several mobile war platforms that resembled giant cyclops forged of metal, ranging from six to ten meters in height.

These humanoid robots and their pilots left an especially strong impression on him.

They were nothing like the primitive loaders he had seen a few minutes ago. Even though Sunny knew that these machines were built and operated by humans, he couldn't shake off the feeling that he was looking at hulking Nightmare Creatures.

Slowly, the scale and scope of the upcoming operation started to dawn on him. Sure, he had known the approximate numbers for a long time… but knowing and seeing were two different things.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then asked in a slightly hoarse voice:

"...You said that there would be several such convoys?"

Master Jet nodded as she easily controlled the PTV:

"Yes. Four, for now. Two will sail from the Northern Quadrant, one from both the Eastern and the Western. Each will transport around a hundred thousand soldiers to Antarctica in the coming month. That will also include around twenty thousand Awakened, and fifty or so Masters."

She paused, and then added:

"If the mobilization goes well, we will eventually have at least sixty thousand Awakened and anywhere between a hundred and three hundred Masters participating in the evacuation efforts."

Sunny took a deep breath.

These numbers… while the amount of mundane humans being sent to Antarctica was much more immense, it was the latter two that gave him pause. Sixty thousand might not have seemed like much, but it meant that a quarter of all Awakened in the world was going to be concentrated on one continent… and that was without even counting those who had already been based in the Southern Quadrant.

The number of Masters was even more unbelievable. Three hundred was more than a half of all Ascended alive today! The government was truly pulling out all the stops.

Such might.

...But was it going to be enough?

Sending so many Awakened to war would also inevitably leave the other three Quadrants with less protection, and their inhabitants more exposed to the vagaries of the Nightmare Spell. The pressure on the existing infrastructure was bound to increase dramatically after the flood of refugees reached the strongholds of humanity, too.

'It is... all such a mess.'

Looking at the thousands of people moving around the temporary camp, Sunny couldn't help but wonder how many of them would be coming back.

…He had no choice but to wonder if he himself would survive, as well.

Even though the members of the First Evacuation Army seemed trained and disciplined, he could see hints of fear and uncertainty hidden deep in their eyes. These people might have been dedicated and professional soldiers, but none of them had ever faced the kind of threat they were going to throw themselves against, soon.

Funnily enough, Sunny — despite his young age and lack of a service record — had come much closer to this kind of warfare and was much better prepared to withstand its horrors than most members of this hastily assembled army.

Finally, he felt something that he had not felt even once since learning about the approaching disaster.

The weight of responsibility slowly settled on his shoulders.

Sunny sighed, and then mentally shook it off.

'What nonsense is this?'

He looked at Master Jet, lingered for a moment, and then asked:

"So… when do I get a dapper uniform?"

Chapter-814: Special Company

Once they entered the confines of the port fortress, the human traffic lessened to a considerable degree. However, there were still plenty of people around, all moving with determined haste. Master Jet parked the PTV near a blocky, low building and opened the hatch to exit.

Breathing in the cold winter air, she closed her eyes for a moment, and then let out a long sigh.

After that, Soul Reaper glanced at him with a grin.

"Actually, you arrived just on time. The officer roster of our company is more or less full as of a few days ago, so we were about to hold our first briefing. It was supposed to start half an hour ago, but I postponed to come grab you from the train station."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Master Jet nodded:

"Everyone more or less only knows as much as you do, so I'll bring all of you up to speed in one go. Granted, the rest had more time to prepare, not to mention the fact that they have been with the government for years. Don't let those old dogs intimidate you, though."

Sunny smiled.

"Do I look like someone who is easily intimidated?"

She glanced at him and laughed.

"You do, actually. That is one of your advantages, as far as I'm concerned. Being underestimated is always a boon."

She walked forward at a brisk pace and said without looking back:

"The paperwork can wait for later. We'll get you settled and processed after the briefing. Usually, you would not have been allowed anywhere near the classified information without proper clearance and documentation, but these days proper procedure has taken a backseat to efficiency. Plus, there are very few people who can… resist my charm."

Sunny hurried to keep up with Master Jet as they entered the low building. After cutting through several checkpoints without anyone daring to look directly at Soul Reaper, let alone say something about the apparent civilian she was dragging into the guts of the military bunker with her, he understood that her status and reputation truly trampled procedure, at least to a large extent.

Not only mundane humans, but even Awakened treated her with fearful respect. Even an occasional Master they walked past seemed to give her face.

He hesitated, then asked with curiosity:

"Can I ask… what, exactly, is your official title in the First Army?"

Master Jet glanced at him, then smiled.

"Why, I am now Colonel Jet, senior officer of the First Awakened Irregular Company of the Northern Quadrant Corps of the Evacuation Army. Kind of a mouthful, huh?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then reached into his memory of the government force organization and hierarchy. He had studied the topic a bit before leaving the city.

"Wait… aren't companies supposed to be commanded by captains? Colonel is… three or four ranks above that. It's just one step away from being a general!"

Soul Reaper nodded.

"Usually, you would be right. However, titles and authority become messy when Awakened are involved. As a rule of thumb, Awakened

are one rank above what they would have been as mundane soldiers. That's just for normal ones, though. As irregulars, we will exist somewhat outside the army hierarchy, so our status was bumped up to reflect that."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

'Outside the hierarchy? What?'

He hesitated, then said in a subdued tone:

"I am… not sure what "irregulars" mean."

She flashed him a smile.

"You will be in a few minutes."

Together, they entered an elevator that brought them deep underground. Master Jet led him through winding corridors of the military bunker and then pressed the palm of her hand against a complicated biometric lock to open a thick alloy door.

Sunny found himself in a spacious chamber that housed a large, round table. Five individuals were already seated around it, quietly waiting for the start of the briefing.

When Master Jet entered, they all stood up and saluted her.

…It was then that Sunny realized that all of them were Ascended.

Three of them were men, while the other two were women. The oldest Master seemed to be nearing his fifties, while the youngest was only slightly older than Soul Reaper. All of them wore serious expressions on their faces and looked at her with somber respect.

She waved a hand.

"At ease. We are all Ascended here. There's no need for ceremony."

The Masters hesitated for a few moments, then relaxed and sat down.

Master Jet unbuttoned her navy blue trench coat, then threw it on

the backrest of an empty chair.

Sunny let out a heavy sigh, then made sure to look somewhere else. His cheek suddenly started to burn, for no apparent reason.

As it turned out, his new superior had dismissed her usual uniform in favor of a tight-fitting black bodysuit. In fact, all the Masters present in the room were wearing one.

It made sense. People like Sunny and them had no need of army-issued armor. They would all be using their Memories in the field. A bodysuit like that could easily fit under any type of enchanted armor, so wearing it instead of a uniform was not only more convenient, but also practical.

That didn't make it easy on Sunny, though. There were very few places he could rest his eyes on without potentially getting into trouble.

It was pure torture!

Master Jet sat down, prompting him to do the same. As much as Sunny was flustered by the black bodysuits, the rest of the Ascended were similarly confused by his civilian clothes and age.

Finally, one of them glanced at Soul Reaper and asked:

"Excuse me, ma'am. Who is this… young man? Is he your new adjutant?"

She glanced at them, remained silent for a moment, and then smiled.

"He? Gods, no… this "young man" is Master Sunless, the latest and final addition to the command structure of the First Irregular Company. He is not only one of the youngest humans in history to reach the Rank of an Ascended, but also has a kill count higher than most of you combined. So… give him a warm welcome, I guess…"

Chapter-815: First Irregular Company

The five Ascended were surprised by such a colorful description, but quickly got over their shock. No one seemed to have doubts about Sunny's credentials, and for a simple reason — there were no weak Masters. Every person who had chosen to challenge the Second Nightmare and survived was an elite by definition. So, his Rank was the only proof of competence he needed to be accepted by them.

That was not to say that these government officers felt threatened by Sunny's accomplishments. All of them were experienced, battle-tested fighters... specialists. They had well-deserved confidence in their own capabilities.

Master Jet looked at them and smiled.

"Since we have already started, let's get introductions out of the way. Some of you may know each other, while others are relatively new faces…"

She went down the line, introducing each of the Ascended that were going to serve as the backbone of the First Irregular Company.

The oldest among them was a muscular man that seemed to be in his late forties or early fifties. Of course, as an Ascended, he looked incredibly well for his age. Master Randall was mature and grizzled, with grey hair and a full beard that perfectly suited his chiseled, masculine face.

The black bodysuit lay snug against his well-pronounced muscles. Everything about the man told that he was a seasoned, consummate soldier. His presence was solid and steady.

Master Randall might have not fought side by side with the members

of the First Generation when the Spell had appeared, but due to his age, he most likely witnessed its descent as a child. His well of experience was of great benefit to the company… in fact, one would have expected him to be in charge instead of Soul Reaper.

However, even if the man had any thoughts about that matter, he did not let them show.

The gorgeous woman sitting next to him stood out among the group of Masters due to her good-natured, friendly demeanor. Ascended Jesse looked almost like the opposite of Master Jet: she had straw blond hair, a healthy tan, sparkling blue eyes, and radiated a strange feeling of warmth. Coincidentally, she was the closest to Soul Reaper in terms of age.

No one would have called the beautiful blonde soft, though. Her tall, slender body brimmed with energy and barely suppressed strength. The relaxed attitude hid a sharp and cutting edge. This Master seemed to be not only enthusiastic about life, but also about combat and the carnage of battle. She was a formidable warrior, without a doubt.

So were the others.

The third woman among the officers of the company was called Ascended Winter. She was in her late thirties and seemed to be the most calm of the group. Her curly hair was dark brown and tied into a simple ponytail. Sunny didn't know what color her eyes were because, strangely, the woman wore a pair of polarized sunglasses even though they were all currently deep underground.

She sat on her chair in a pose so relaxed that it almost seemed inappropriate for this important meeting. Her beautiful face was aloof and nonchalant. The sleeves of her bodysuit were rolled up, revealing toned forearms and a solid tattoo that turned one of them completely black.

If not for the fact that Master Winter had stood up to salute Soul Reaper when they entered, Sunny would have thought that she was fast asleep.

The man next to her seemed to have the same tattoo, hinting that they were, or had been, members of the same unit in the past. He was of the same age as his female colleague, with honest eyes and a gallant bearing. There was dark stubble on his handsome face, and black circles under his eyes.

Ascended Dale seemed like a steady, stalwart warrior. Sunny did not know for sure, but felt that the man's Aspect had at least some relation to defense and protection. He sensed that if Master Dale decided to stand his ground, very few things in the world would have been able to move him.

The last officer of the First Irregular Company was slightly older and stood in stark contrast to Master Dale. His cold eyes, inexpressive face, and chilling gaze all expressed one thing…

Ascended Davis was a killer. He seemed like the most offense-oriented Master of the bunch, but that quality was not without subtlety. On the contrary, it seemed to be shrewd, quiet, and absolutely deadly.

Sunny suspected that Davis was what he himself had once wished to be — the kind of fighter who utilized cunning and stealth to destroy the enemy with one surgical strike, thus avoiding the trouble of having to withstand retaliation.

Together with Sunny and Jet, the five Masters were going to lead the First Irregular Company.

Coincidentally, just like Soul Reaper, each of the five Ascended had a nickname. Masters Randall, Jesse, Winter, Dale, and Davis were also known as Vandal, Mustang, Queen, Knight, and Pride.

Sunny was the only person without one, which made him feel slightly jealous.

'Well… I can always go by Mongrel.'

He blinked.

'What? No! That's a terrible nickname, and an even worse idea!'

Who said that he even needed a nickname? He was perfectly fine being called Sunny, anyway!

After the initial introductions were complete, Master Jet glanced at them again and said:

"We will get to know each other's Aspects and combat capabilities later. It is not too important for now, anyway, since I expect all of you to act independently of the rest more often than not. Now, let's get down to business. Today, I will bring you up to speed about the projected composition of the First Irregular Company, our purpose, and guiding military doctrine…"

She pressed something on her communicator, and a large projection appeared in the middle of the table.

Sunny studied the large archipelago with a prominent landmass in the east.

Master Jet lingered for a moment, and then continued.

"But to do that, you will have to understand the general shape of the upcoming operation. As all of you already know, this is Antarctica."

She gestured at the projection.

"All Antarctica is divided into three parts…"

Chapter-816: Three Phases

Master Jet gestured to the projection.

"All of Antarctica is divided into three parts. West Antarctica, East Antarctica, and the Antarctic Center."

West Antarctica was mostly submerged in water and consisted of a scattering of islands, some of them small, some of them large. East Antarctica was one large landmass that was peppered by numerous lakes, with a prominent mountain chain in the middle of it. The Antarctic Center was a long, narrow landmass that rested between the two, occupied almost entirely by tall mountains.

Soul Reaper continued:

"West Antarctica is mostly devoid of human population, so it presents little interest to us. The Antarctic Center is an administrative and technological hub of the quadrant, while East Antarctica is the largest and most densely populated region of the continent."

She paused for a moment, and then added somberly:

"The First Evacuation Army is going to set sail in two weeks. We will reach Antarctica two, maybe three weeks after that. By that time, the Chain of Nightmares would already be starting. Local garrisons are already experiencing an increased number of manifesting Gates, but the number will explode by the end of March. After that, it will only keep growing."

Master Jet stared at the projection for a bit, and then said calmly:

"No matter how many soldiers we send, we won't be able to contain the flood of Nightmare Creatures that enter through these Gates. This… is something that had never happened in history before. Even the great wars that the First Generation fought pale in comparison to

the Chain of Nightmares. Don't forget that almost all abominations back then were of the Dormant Rank. We aren't that lucky."

She sighed, then leaned back and crossed her arms.

"According to our scientists and diviners, the mass of Gates is going to be of the Second Category and Third categories. That means Awakened, Fallen, and even Corrupted Nightmare Creatures, in numbers greater than anything we have seen. Of course, something even worse can happen. So… we are not going to try and contain them."

The faces of the Master slowly grew dim. Noticing it, Soul Reaper shook her head.

"There are better ways to achieve our objective. Once the army makes landfall, it will split into three parts, with each part pursuing a distinct objective during the first phase of the operation. One of the objectives is to turn a small number of select cities into fortified evacuation centers that can withstand the siege of Nightmare Creatures for months, or even years ahead."

Master Jet pointed at several points on the map, then continued:

"The second objective is to relocate all external human population to these centers, where they will wait for their turn to board the ships… neither the relocation nor the wait are going to be a short process. Finally, the third objective is to establish and maintain the evacuation corridors for the relocating citizens.

Once everyone is safely behind the established perimeter of siege strongholds, the first phase of the operation will be considered to be complete."

Sunny tentatively raised a hand.

"Yes?"

He glanced at other Masters with a dubious expression, then asked:

"Why are we waiting for the disaster to strike before starting to evacuate people? Wouldn't it be easier to get at least some of them

out right now?"

Soul Reaper gave him a rueful smile.

"That is because everyone was convinced that the event won't happen for at least a few more years. Our level of preparation is wholly inadequate, and there are no established means to start the evacuation prematurely. In short, the government was caught with its pants down.

The deployment of the First Army is a messy and slapdash affair, which means that a lot more soldiers are going to die as the result. Make no mistake, though… this is the best we can do, considering the situation."

Sunny sighed, then nodded in understanding.

Master Jet glanced at him and continued:

"After the first phase of the operation is complete, the second one will commence. By then, the Second Evacuation Army should be already fully formed and arrive to reinforce the depleted First Army. This phase is simple… which is not to say easy. We will pull back all our forces to the siege capitals and hold them for as long as it takes to evacuate every civilian.

After that, the third phase will result in a complete exodus of humans from Antarctica and the consequent heavy continental bombardment. The Southern Quadrant will cease to exist."

She took a poignant pause, then smiled darkly.

"That is the gist of the operation in broad strokes. Now, for details… as you must have already surmised from the name of our company, it is going to play a special role throughout all three phases of the evacuation. The First Irregular Company will not be tied to any existing battalion, regiment, or division. We will not be supporting or leading any of the grunt soldiers.

Instead, we will act as elite irregulars."

Soul Reaper leaned forward and looked at them with her icy blue

eyes.

"Each of you will be in charge of a cohort of some of the best Awakened warriors in the government employ. The cohorts will act semi-independently and respond to any overwhelming obstacle that threatens to slow down the evacuation.

Whenever the mundane soldiers or their Awakened counterparts encounter a problem that they can't handle, we will be sent to resolve the situation through any means necessary."

The room suddenly became very cold, and so did Master Jet's expression.

"What it means is that we will be thrown into the most dire, bloody, and hopeless flashpoints of the entire operation on a consistent basis. Unlike regular soldiers who will most likely have time to rest and recover between battles, we will be enduring a constant succession of rapid combat deployments until the evacuation is completed… or until we all die.

That is why the First Irregular Company was not only allocated seven Ascended, but also why these Ascended are the absolute best we have. Each of you is an elite among elites. Make that count."

She studied the faces of her subordinates, and then raised an eyebrow.

"Any questions?"

Master Winter suddenly raised a hand, revealing that she was not, in fact, asleep.

When she spoke, her voice was unexpectedly relaxed:

"What's our logistics situation? Is there going to be food, or are we going to spend months chewing on monster meat? You know… like usual…"

Chapter-817: Captain Sunless

The briefing lasted for a while longer. The seven Ascended of the First Irregular Company had a lot of things to discuss, and while a few nuances went over Sunny's head, he slowly gained a better understanding of the upcoming ordeal.

That said, each of them had way too much to do before the naval convoy left for the Southern Quadrant, so wasting precious time on long conversations was not in anyone's interest. Eventually, the five Masters left, leaving Sunny and Jet alone in the meeting room.

There was a grim expression on his face.

Sunny sighed, then glanced at his superior.

"I am not going to lie… all of this seems a bit overwhelming."

Soul Reaper smiled and shook her head dismissively.

"Don't be too concerned. You already have the necessary experience and qualifications to make things work. It is not like the others are better prepared to deal with something of that scope… above all, we will need the ability to swiftly learn and adapt. That is how we will survive this unprecedented mess of a disaster."

He looked at the ceiling with a thoughtful expression. Well, when Master Jet put it like that… yes, it made sense to say that he was qualified to face the challenges of the Chain of Nightmares. The other irregulars might have been older and more experienced, but no one had ever lived through something like that. In the absence of relevant experience, adaptability was arguably more important.

In that regard, his young age and flexible mindset could even be called an advantage. Plus, Sunny had always excelled at being able to adapt to anything.

Soul Reaper stood up and beckoned as she headed for the exit.

"Come on. Let's get you settled."

They moved to a different level of the bunker, where some sort of administrative center had been hastily established in recent weeks. The military admins were even busier than the soldiers above ground. An atmosphere of feverish, barely contained chaos hung in the air as hundreds of officers tried to juggle tens of thousands of issues as they prepared the army for departure.

Maybe because of this haste, or maybe because of Master Jet's presence, the paperwork did not take long. To Sunny's astonishment, it took less than half an hour for him to officially become a government agent and an officer of the First Evacuation Army. He was issued the rank of a captain, along with all the status and privileges of one.

Sunny couldn't help but blink a couple of times.

'Captain Sunless… damn, it has a nice ring to it.'

Without wasting any time, they moved to another level, where Sunny was issued with a basic set of gear corresponding to his rank. Among other things, he also received the ubiquitous black bodysuit. His communicator was already of a high-grade government model, so it simply received an extensive software upgrade.

As they waited for all the routine procedures to be performed, Sunny and Master Jet quietly discussed business.

"So… what exactly happens now?"

She looked at him for a few moments.

"Well, you will have to do a lot of things to get ready for Antarctica. Don't worry too much and take it one step at a time."

Soul Reaper paused.

"First things first. In the next few days, you will have to make several important decisions. Don't rush and really think matters through

before committing to a choice. However, don't wait too long, either. The longer you take, the less time you'll have to accomplish other tasks."

She gestured to his communicator.

"All the necessary features and permissions have already been added to your comm. Your credentials should have been added into the system, as well, so you can access the data through it."

Sunny checked the new features added to the operating system of his communicator and nodded.

"So what exactly are these decisions?"

Master Jet smiled.

"First of all, you are an officer of an elite combat unit now. The members of the First Irregular Company are entitled to receive a fair share of rare equipment and precious resources that the government has to offer. That said, each cohort is unique and has special demands.

To make sure that you and your soldiers are outfitted with not only great tools, but also ones that suit them best, a very generous amount of contribution points has been added to your personal balance."

She gestured to one of the symbols on the screen of his communicator.

"Your cohort will be provided with a basic set of assets, but on top of that, you will be able to customize them or acquire additional equipment yourself. You can peruse what the logistics and supply has to offer through that interface, as well as claim whatever you choose.

Of course, the inventory available to the First Irregular Company is much more robust and exclusive than what mundane units have access to."

Soul Reaper sighed wistfully.

"What you settle on is at your discretion. You can decide to upgrade

your personal gear with powerful tools, Memories, or even Echoes. You can choose to equip your soldiers with better equipment instead. You can assign most points to comprehensively upgrade the technical assets provided to your cohort.

Hell, you can even convert all the contribution points into credits and transfer them to your personal account… not that I would advise doing something like that, of course."

Sunny's eyes glistened.

If there was one thing he loved, it was receiving free stuff! Even if most of the contribution points would go into strengthening his cohort, it was still a great opportunity to soothe his greed. He was sure that the government had a lot of amazing stuff in its coffers…

The decision to enlist was already starting to look much more appealing.

…There was one problem, however.

He gave Master Jet a curious look.

"I can't really fine-tune gear and equipment to the needs of my cohort if I don't have a cohort, though. Right?"

She nodded.

"Indeed. Actually, that is the second set of decisions…"

Chapter-818: Irregulars, Assemble

Master Jet pointed at another new symbol on the screen of his communicator.

"The process is basically the same. You can shop for members of the cohort through your comm… well, not really. Contribution points have nothing to do with the selection, of course. There is a pool of elite Awakened fighters that have been transferred to this port. The First Irregular Company has priority right to recruit forty-two of them, six per cohort.

As the youngest captain, you get the first pick."

Sunny stared at the screen, deep in thought.

So, the first thing he had to do was to pick six Awakened that would become his soldiers during the Antarctica campaign. He had no doubt that each of them was an elite warrior among the government forces… but being a good fighter was not enough.

Creating a strong cohort was no small feat. Its members not only had to be able to pull their own weight, but also meet a long list of needs that a combat unit possessed. This was especially true for the seven cohorts that were going to comprise the First Irregular Company, since each of them was expected to operate independently.

In a sense, this approach was more familiar to him. Awakened serving a large force were able to specialize within the confines of their units. One cohort could do especially well in melee combat, but lack the means of dealing damage from range. Another cohort could specialize in attacking exclusively from distance.

By working together, these different units were able to shore up each

other's weaknesses and allow the soldiers to express their greatest strengths.

An independent cohort was very different. Although it could possess a specialization, it had to be well-rounded and excel in various aspects by necessity. This is how most cohorts in the Dream Realm functioned, and what Sunny was familiar with.

In any case, choosing six Awakened that could fulfill a multitude of roles while synergizing with each other was a daunting task. There was a lot of factors he would have to consider.

And after that… he had to assume command of these strangers and lead them into battle after battle. Their survival was his responsibility. Their deaths, should any of his soldiers fall, would be on his conscience, too.

Sunny let out a long sigh, then looked at Master Jet.

"Any advice?"

She lingered for a few moments, then nodded.

"No matter how good these elites are, you will still be the core element and the deadliest weapon of the cohort. Don't neglect variability, but choose those whose Aspects compliment yours."

Sunny smiled.

"Ah, that won't be a problem. I might not excel in any one thing, but at the same time, I am sort of a jack-of-all-trades. While my Aspect leans toward utility, I can do a bit of everything. That leaves me at a disadvantage in some situations, but it also means that I can work well with a great variety of Awakened. Anyone can benefit from having me by their side, and vice versa."

Master Jet thought for a few moments.

"Versatility is a strength in and of itself. Since you are not limited by a narrow focus, the best course of action would be to assemble a well-balanced group of fighters that can respond to any situation with a high level of effectiveness. That will actually make my job a bit

easier, since I'll be able to send your cohort to solve a wider variety of problems."

She lingered for a bit, and then added:

"If there is one piece of advice I can give, it's to not neglect utility in favor of direct combat strength. Antarctica… no matter how prepared we think we are, it is going to test us in ways that no one expects. Things will go wrong, and then go from bad to worse. Mobility, survival, mental resilience… all these things and plenty others might turn out to be much more important than we think.

It is also going to be a long, cruel, and punishing campaign. Keep that in mind."

Sunny sighed. Long, cruel, and punishing… that was basically the description of most of his experiences with the Nightmare Spell. That was nothing new.

He stared at his communicator for a bit, then asked:

"What about after I've assembled the cohort? Most of these soldiers are probably older than me. They are also devoted government servants, while I am somewhat of a hired mercenary. I doubt that they will be happy to be under command of someone like me, instead of one of the other distinguished Masters."

Soul Reaper shook her head.

"You are not exactly correct. Sure, you are younger than the other captains of our company. Some might see it as a weakness, but at the same time, it's a sign of excellence and greater potential. After all, none of us managed to Ascend before turning twenty. I am considered somewhat of a prodigy, and you beat my record by five years.

So, I don't expect these soldiers to show reluctance to respect your command."

She paused, then added in a serious tone:

"However, there is a great difference between being able to issue

orders and being able to inspire confidence. There is no easy method to make your soldiers follow you, not simply obey you. You will have to find a way to win their loyalty on your own, Sunny."

Master Jet smiled.

"However, I don't think that it will be too hard. Once we reach Antarctica, things will fall into place. Lead them to victory, keep them alive, and they'll learn to trust you."

Sunny thought for a bit, then nodded.

Actions spoke louder than words. He might face some resistance at the start, but battle would swiftly resolve everything. Either he would win his soldiers over, or all seven of them would die. In any case, the problem was going to disappear.

Soul Reaper briefly gripped his shoulder, and then said:

"Anyway, I don't think you should worry about these matters yet. You have plenty of other issues to solve. No matter how professional and prepared these guys are, forming a strong cohort takes more than simply assembling all its members together. You will all have to learn how to fight side by side and leverage your unique powers to form good synergy. Well, I don't have to tell you.

You're not a novice."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Yeah… I have some experience with that."

She sighed.

"Do remember that you will only have three, maybe four weeks left to prepare. That is not nearly enough time to deepen the cooperation level of the cohort, but do as much as you can. There will be proper training facilities aboard the ships, so don't stop working until we make landfall."

Sunny looked at her with a serious expression.

"I won't."

Master Jet nodded, then waved a hand.

"Well, I bet you have enough to think about. I'll leave you to it, then. Don't take too much time deciding on who you want to recruit. The sooner you settle that, the sooner you can start bringing your cohort to shape and spending those sweet contribution points."

He smiled and looked as she turned around and disappeared into one of the corridors of the underground bunker.

Then, Sunny lowered his gaze and studied the screen of his communicator.

He had a lot to think about, indeed.

Chapter-819: Alloy Beast

The room provided to Sunny was a far cry from the luxurious cabin he had enjoyed on the train. It was small, spartan, and lacked windows due to being located deep underground. The designers of the military bunker did not even install a false one, so the walls lacked the lifelike projections of the outside.

Not that Sunny cared about such things. In fact, he quite liked the solid nature of his temporary quarters. Perhaps things would have been different if he did not possess the ability to escape to the surface with the help of Shadow Step, but since he did, the fear of being buried under countless tons of stone and soil was not bothering him too much.

The room reminded him of his hidden lair in the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, which was a pleasant bonus.

Sitting on a narrow bed, Sunny sighed and projected the screen of his communicator on the opposite wall. Leaning back, he then got lost in thought for a few minutes.

In the next day or so, he would have to make a lot of important decisions. There were a lot of things to consider. While the task seemed daunting, he was rather excited to start.

'It's like playing a game… only without checkpoints and real human lives at stake. Including mine. So… uh… I guess nothing like a game, actually.'

The first thing he did was acquaint himself with the default set of assets provided to his future cohort by the government. This generous and highly optimized array of premium gear and equipment included everything to cover the basic needs of his unit during their deployment in Antarctica, from thermoregulated outerwear to priceless spelltech medical kits and beyond.

The centerpiece of the set was, without a doubt, an advanced all-terrain personnel carrier that was going to serve as the mobile home of his cohort in the future. This heavily armored transport vehicle resembled an angular, high-tech mix between a turtle and a rhinoceros.

…Of course, Sunny only knew what a rhinoceros was because he had looked up the extinct beast after learning that the APC was colloquially known as Rhino. It was hard to believe that the massive thing was an actual animal and not a strange Nightmare Creature.

Despite its prodigious size and thick armor, the Rhino armored personnel carrier was capable of moving with immense speed across various terrains. It could even climb mountains without too much problem, provided that the driver knew what they were doing.

The advanced variant provided to the cohorts of the First Irregular Company was additionally modified with even more robust armor, inordinately powerful engines, enhanced internals, and a sophisticated command and communications suite.

Of course, there was always room for improvement. In fact, the interface offered Sunny a lot of opportunities to enhance the APC much further. These additional augmentations were going to cost him a lot of contribution points, however.

Still, he was inclined to believe that they would be worth it. The armored vehicle was not only going to be responsible for keeping his cohort mobile, it would also serve as the logistical core of their deployment. Its importance was already apparent due to the fact that the default set of assets provided by the government was based on its carrying capacity.

The logistics and supply officers in charge of compiling this array of gear were not familiar with the Covetous Coffer, of course. Thanks to his loyal toothy chest, Sunny would be able to more or less double his cohort's storage space. That alone gave him a lot of flexibility as far as spending contribution points on additional equipment was concerned.

'The tech is important… however, it is also unreliable.'

Gates were known to mess with technology in various ways. The military vehicle certainly included several measures to minimize that effect, but it would still be prudent of him to beef this aspect up. After all, no one knew what would happen if dozens, or even hundreds of Gates came to exist in the area around the APC at the same time.

That was something for Sunny to think about later, however.

Now that he knew what he was dealing with, he had a clearer picture of what kind of Awakened he wanted to recruit.

Closing one interface and opening another, he rubbed his temples and sighed.

'That is not going to be easy.'

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Soon enough, hundreds of concise dossiers were in front of him, each containing the personnel file of one of the best Awakened soldiers stationed in the port. Most of them were going to be assigned to other units, while forty-two would become members of the elite First Irregular Company.

Six of them would be his own subordinates.

For a while, Sunny was paralyzed by all the choices.

Each dossier contained the description of the Awakened's Aspect and Abilities, their service record, and psychological profile, as well as of additional skills and specializations that the soldier might have mastered and other information.

His task was to pick six warriors who would not only comprise a well-rounded cohort and complement his own powers, but also work well with each other both in terms of combat ability and interpersonal compatibility. The former was already hard enough, but the latter gave him a headache.

Luckily, very few people working for the government possessed contrarian and antisocial personalities. People who chose the life of

service were predisposed to having a certain level of agreeableness by definition.

…Unlike Sunny. He was contrarian and antisocial enough to balance out their agreeableness all by himself!

One thing that the files did not include, regretfully, was detailed information about the Flaws of these elite soldiers. Not even the government servants were comfortable sharing something like that with their employer. Each file only mentioned how severe the Flaw had been judged to be through passive observation, and sometimes an approximate evaluation of its specific effects.

Which was a shame. A serious enough Flaw could derail any battle plan.

Just out of curiosity, Sunny looked up the dossiers of the other Ascended captains — Vandal, Mustang, Queen, Knight, and Pride — as well. Their files were also there, although in a much more redacted version.

Reading what little was left unredacted, he couldn't help but whistle.

'...Impressive.'

Master Jet's personal file was even more obscure. Pretty much everything except for her name and Rank was blacked out.

His own dossier was rather short and mostly consisted of question marks. Either the government truly knew so little about him, or simply chose not to show how well they were informed.

'Well… at least they got my height right.'

Sunny closed the file and shook his head.

He could not allow himself to delay the task any further.

He was in for a long and sleepless night…

Chapter-820: Importance of Utility

Sunny knew what he needed, more or less.

A couple of frontline fighters, a couple of ranged specialists, someone to provide utility. A healer, ideally, although even among these elites, there were too few.

Fortunately, Sunny himself possessed a wide range of versatile abilities that could cover many needs of the cohort. He was able to fight up close or at range. He could scout or flank the enemies by using Shadow Step. He could use Shadow Manifestation to accomplish a multitude of tasks.

Still, covering all the basics was not enough. The Antarctica campaign was promising to be long and grueling, maybe even unbearable. He had no doubt that they would face all kinds of Nightmare Creatures, from landbound to aerial to aquatic. Some of them were going to try and kill them with brutal force, some would employ more insidious means.

To ensure the best chances of survival, the cohort had to be strong, balanced, and capable of accomplishing more than the sum of its parts would suggest. They had to be able to work together and respond to all kinds of threats.

Even with several hundred candidates, he was not sure how possible it was to build something as formidable as his own cohort had been, both on the Forgotten Shore and the Chained Isles.

'First things first…'

Although some would have been tempted to go for offensive powerhouses first, Sunny made a different opinion. He filtered the

dossiers, allowing only those of Awakened with Utility Aspects to remain.

Master Jet had been right… although pure combat strength was immensely important, a war was often lost or won off the battlefield. As far as Sunny was concerned, utility was just as vital.

His own experience confirmed it. Back on the Forgotten Shore, fighters like Nephis and Caster had shone so bright that everyone paid them all the attention. People like Sunny and Cassie remained more or less unnoticed.

However, they had contributed as much, if not more, to the cohort's survival. Yes, those with pure combat Aspects played a larger role in direct confrontations with the Nightmare Creatures. But it was only because Sunny had scouted ahead that they had been able to avoid battling swarms of abominations that would have overwhelmed them in an instant.

Cassie's uncanny intuition and affinity to revelation had saved them too many times to count. It had helped the cohort avoid lethal dangers that often could not be seen, let alone slain with a blade.

Not paying enough attention to utility would have been a grave mistake. More than that, this choice would allow Sunny to hand-pick other members of the cohort to suit the ensuing situation. The first decision would widen and define the cohort's foundation, making the rest easier to make.

He spent a lot of time reading through dozens of dossiers. There were all kinds of talented Awakened that possessed incredible Abilities. Eventually, Sunny narrowed the selection to just three of the most interesting candidates.

A mature and experienced Awakened caught his eye due to the Ability to move and shape earth as if it was a liquid, and then swiftly turn it back to solid state. With his help, the cohort would be able to literally shape the battlefield to stack the odds in their favor.

While that Ability was too slow and weak to deal direct damage, Sunny could imagine building all types of funnels, defensive walls,

and trenches with the man's help. Hell, in certain situations, they would even be able to turn the ground into quicksand, trapping multiple abominations or at least reducing the mobility of the enemy.

Their own mobility was also an issue. No matter how versatile the Rhino was, there would be situations, without a doubt, where its incredible all-terrain maneuverability would fail. The Ability to create a road was going to come in extremely handy at that time.

Another government elite seemed even more useful. This tall and athletic man was capable of creating stable short-distance spatial rifts. Basically, he could allow the fighters of the cohort to teleport around the battlefield with impunity.

Sunny did not have to think long to understand how incredible this Ability was. He had used Shadow Step to vanquish his foes numerous times, and granting the same advantage to the whole cohort was an indescribably potent tool.

Hell, he didn't even have to send people through this rift… throwing a spelltech grenade or a manifestation of a sorcerous Aspect Ability would wreak havoc among the enemies just as well.

The third candidate was a young woman with mousy hair and an unassuming face. Her Ability seemed less potent than that of the two men, but could also be quite useful in the right situations.

Just like Cassie, the young woman possessed an affinity to revelations, albeit a much lesser one. While she couldn't compete with Song of the Fallen in the broadness of application, the narrow focus of her Aspect was capable of producing more palpable results.

The young woman was able to perceive weaknesses and vulnerabilities of living creatures, as well as share visual perception among several people. She, too, could comprehensively enhance the cohort's battle effectiveness, although in a less direct way.

'Hmm…'

Sunny spent a long time staring at the three dossiers.

Which one should he choose? Each held incredible value in his eyes.

He was even tempted to claim all three…

But no. While Sunny was not blind to the importance of utility, he needed powerful fighters to make use of it. Without offensive strength, the cohort would be simply unable to act on the provided opportunities. Plus, his own Aspect already leaned toward utility.

…Eventually, he dismissed the dossiers of the two men and left only the image of the meek young woman with mousy hair on the wall.

'Awakened Kim…'

The more Sunny stared at her portrait, the more he was sure of his choice.

Yes, the first candidate could shape the battlefield to their advantage. But Sunny was able to achieve a bit of that himself with the help of Shadow Manifestation.

Yes, the second candidate could provide an indescribable tactical flexibility to the cohort. However, the short range and the stationary nature of the spatial rifts was not easy to exploit in the chaotic and unpredictable mayhem of combat.

Awakened Kim, on the other hand, could provide a powerful boost to any offensive action. Her Ability synergized with the widest variety of Aspects, including Sunny's own. More than that, unlike the other two soldiers, her powers scaled with the threat.

Being able to create a wall of stone was useless if the enemy could turn stone to dust. Being able to attack an abomination from the flank would accomplish nothing if the abomination was of a high enough Rank to become immune to Awakened weapons.

Being able to see the vulnerabilities of the enemy, however, would be a boon for the cohort no matter how powerful of an enemy they faced. In fact, the more dire their foe, the more important Awakened Kim's Ability could become.

There was also another, much simpler reason why Sunny decided to choose the third candidate.

The young woman could share visual perception between multiple people. Antarctica, meanwhile, enjoyed an uninterrupted night that lasted for several months.

What it meant was that the First Irregular Company would be fighting in near-complete darkness for at least four months after arriving into the Southern Quadrant. While this problem could be somewhat solved with technology, there was a better and more reliable solution.

Sunny could see in the dark, and with Awakened Kim's help, his soldiers would share in this ability, too.

He looked at the dossier one last time and nodded.

'Good…'

This young woman was going to be the first cornerstone of his cohort.

Chapter-821: Offense Pillars

Now that Sunny knew what kind of logistical and combat support his cohort would be able to enjoy — thanks to him, Awakened Kim, and the heavily armored Rhino — he had a tentative understanding of what direction he had to follow.

In the next several hours, he carefully studied hundreds of dossiers, slowly narrowing the list of potential candidates. By the time the night was drawing to a close, he was more or less ready to make the final selection.

Of course, ideally, Sunny would have preferred to meet the recruits face to face and put them through a gauntlet to get to know their characters, styles, and limits better. But in the current situation, being able to study their personnel files was already good enough.

He had chosen several important traits that most, or better yet each, of the candidates had to possess. First of all, Sunny decided to favor sustainability and lasting battlefield presence over pure might and burst damage potential.

Sure, many of the elite government soldiers possessed awesome Aspect Abilities that could deliver truly fearsome results in a short span of time. However, these Awakened also burned through essence with a frightening speed. The Antarctica campaign promised to be a marathon… or rather, a marathon stacked on top of a marathon, stacked on top of a marathon, stacked on top of a marathon.

Longevity was king.

He vastly preferred fighting side by side with people who could maintain their peak battle state for long stretches of time, even if their immediate combat performance was not as impressive.

Secondly, he deliberately paid more attention to fighters who

implemented higher than usual amounts of finesse, calculation, and cunning in their approach to combat. Not only were such people better at conserving their energy, but they also suited his own inclinations very well.

Additionally, fighters like these were bound to make better use of Awakened Kim's Ability to recognize vulnerabilities of the enemy.

The third and last trait he sought out was mental fortitude. No government elite was a slouch in terms of determination and resilience, but some stood out among all others. Most of them were those Awakened who had gone through crushing defeats, but were nevertheless able to pick themselves up and grow stronger for it.

Sunny was more or less certain that he had endured more torment and hopelessness than even the other Ascended captains of the First Irregular Company. As such, he had a better idea of how ruthless and punishing the long campaign in the Southern Quadrant could turn out to be.

So, even if it meant settling for someone with less power or talent, he was determined to pick the most dogged and tenacious of the Awakened elites.

In the end, six dossiers remained projected on the wall of his small room.

Awakened Kim had been his first choice. This young woman was the cornerstone of the cohort due to her valuable Aspect, which allowed her to reveal the weaknesses of the enemy and share visual perception among herself and her allies. Additionally, she was a certified technician who could look after the cohort's armored personnel carrier and perform field repairs if need be.

His second choice was a charismatic man in his late twenties. Awakened Belle had a lean figure, athletic build, and blond hair. His expression on the portrait attached to the dossier was laid-back and slightly carefree. Belle was a talented swordsman who excelled in offense and agility. His Aspect made him especially deadly.

The young swordsman was able to turn his body intangible and phase

through solid matter. Despite the fact that he couldn't maintain this state for long, even a second was enough to avoid an enemy attack if used at the right moment. His second Ability allowed him to infuse his weapon with unnatural sharpness and cut through most obstacles.

Although the second Ability devoured soul essence with terrible speed, Awakened Belle was incredibly proficient in using both of them in precise, short bursts. He only needed a fraction of a second to dodge a strike or deliver a killing blow, so there was no need to maintain them for more than that.

As the result, he was able to last much longer on the battlefield than the description of his Aspect would suggest.

Belle was going to be one of the two pillars of Sunny's melee vanguard.

The second pillar was a man named Dorn. Looking at his portrait, Sunny couldn't help but grimace.

'No, this… this is just ridiculous.'

Awakened Dorn was a giant of a man. He was easily taller than Effie, and possessed robust musculature to boot. Just one look at him would have made most people feel small and feeble. The only consolation that Sunny could find was that this powerhouse would be fighting on his side.

Dorn's weapon of choice was a hammer. And not a traditional war hammer, which — despite its usual portrayal in popular media — was actually a relatively light and elegant weapon.

No, Awakened Dorn preferred to fight with something that could only be described as an enchanted version of a sledgehammer. This heavy two-handed implement of destruction was able to crush flesh, bone, stone, and steel with equal ease.

All that would have made one think that the man was a straightforward and single-minded brawler with a penchant for solving problems through brute force, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Instead, the man possessed a serious, sedate attitude

and deeply intelligent eyes.

His Aspect could be described in three words: push and pull. Awakened Dorn was able to manipulate gravity — or at least something that resembled gravity — to empower his strikes with crushing weight and throw his enemies off-balance. By combining these two effects in a precise and calculated manner, he was able to make use of both to vastly elevate the potency of his attacks.

No matter how strong and enduring Dorn's body was, no one would have been able to wildly swing his heavy weapon around for too long. That was why he preferred to conserve his stamina and kill the enemy with one crushing, deliberate, well-timed, and devious strike.

In short, despite his ridiculous size, Awakened Dorn was a man after Sunny's own heart.

Together, Belle and Dorn were going to be the core of the cohort's battle formation.

However, there was another person whom Sunny intended to add to the melee vanguard…

Chapter-822: Shadow Cohort

The third member of the melee vanguard was, perhaps, the second most important person in the cohort — after Sunny himself, of course.

He had agonized over that choice a lot, but eventually settled on a handsome and chivalrous man named Quentin.

Awakened Quentin preferred wearing full plate armor and wielding a sword and a shield. Unlike Belle and Dorn, he was not going to be serving as an offensive powerhouse. He was going to become the defensive bulwark of the melee vanguard… which was not to say that he wasn't a deadly fighter in his own right, of course.

Quentin's Aspect centered around restoration and corrosion. In battle, he was able to continuously repair his shield and his armor no matter what kind of damage they received. There were limits to this Ability, of course, but as long as his Memories weren't outright destroyed, they would eventually regain their original shape.

He was also able to apply a corrosive property to his weapons. The corrosion was not very potent, but as long as enough of his attacks landed, the enemy was bound to eventually succumb under the weight of accumulating decay. This was a slow, but insidious and impactful Ability.

However, it was the first one that made Awakened Quentin so valuable.

That was because he was not limited to restoring only Memories. Quentin's restoration was near universal and could repair various things… including human flesh.

He was a healer.

Of course, as far as these rare specialists went, he wasn't the most powerful. His Ability was comparatively slow and limited. Quentin could not even hope to compete with someone like Nephis or Elyas in terms of speed and efficiency, and even among other healers whose dossiers were available to Sunny, his restorative power did not stand out.

But after thinking about it for a long time, Sunny still decided to go with Quentin. He did not want to employ a more potent healer if that meant that the healer would not be able to fend for themselves in a furious fight. Even though his final choice was somewhat mediocre in terms of healing wounds, the chivalrous man was a more well-rounded and versatile combatant.

Sunny was inspired to make that choice by his memories of Shim, the Fire Keeper healer who had eventually inherited the leadership over Cassie's personal cohort. Despite his lack of a combat Aspect, Shim always fought on the frontline and supported his companions with his blade, his shield, and his steady presence.

Plus, Quentin was also a trained combat medic who possessed deep knowledge of modern medicine. He could even use his Ability to help repair the Rhino should Kim be unable to do it through mundane means.

Overall, Sunny was happy with his decision.

With four members of the cohort already chosen, only two spots remained.

Knowing that he would have to strengthen the ability of his soldiers to attack the enemies from distance and fight against flying abominations, Sunny spent a lot of time searching for a suitable ranged specialist. In the end, his attention was drawn to the dossier of a woman named Samara.

Awakened Samara was tall, beautiful, and aloof. She possessed a very interesting Aspect, though… Samara was capable of infusing material objects with soul essence, as well as converting soul energy into kinetic energy or heat.

What it meant was that she could turn soul essence into charged explosives. In a sense, Awakened Samara was the opposite of Master Jet — while Soul Reaper was able to deal soul damage with physical weapons, she could deal physical damage with soul essence.

She was also very inventive in the applications of her Aspect. Samara was probably the only Awakened Sunny knew of who actively utilized modern firearms. By infusing her ammunition with charged essence, she effectively made them analogous to enchanted weapons.

Nightmare Creatures of higher Ranks were more or less immune to mundane armaments, but susceptible to Memories and even unarmed attacks of Awakened. In Samara's hands, however, any weapon turned into an Awakened weapon.

'What a fascinating Ability…'

As an added bonus, she was also a capable spelltech engineer and technician. Since the APC the cohort would be using was chuck-full of advanced spelltech, that was going to come in handy.

The last member of the cohort Sunny had chosen was called Awakened Luster.

Staring at the man's dossier, Sunny couldn't help but narrow his eyes.

'What a weird name…'

He shook his head, and then sighed.

'Well, maybe his mother had a poetic soul, too.'

The young man was not a very distinguished fighter — that was comparatively, of course, since all the elite government soldiers were solid combatants. His talent and usefulness lay mainly in his unique Aspect.

Although Sunny had not wanted to recruit more utility specialists, he couldn't help but change his stance after reading what young Luster was capable of. This guy was nothing short of a soul healer… or an essence battery, in more crude terms.

His first Ability allowed him to enhance the regeneration rate of soul essence, both his own and that of his allies. His second Ability allowed him to transfer his essence to others.

Sunny did not even have to think to know how vital such an Aspect was going to be in the coming months. Sure, by choosing Luster, he would be sacrificing the opportunity to recruit another battle powerhouse… but the trade-off was worth it, in his opinion.

In other circumstances, Sunny would have been reluctant to make this decision, but Luster's Abilities synergized simply too well with that of Awakened Samara, not to mention serving as a force multiplier for every other member of the cohort.

Additionally, the young man was, apparently, an ace pilot. With him in control of the Rhino, Sunny did not have to worry that the APC would fall off a cliff or get stuck in mud.

Or be turned into an alloy pancake by a random Titan that happened to walk by.

So, the choice was clear.

Awakened Luster would be the last member of his cohort.

Sunny moved slightly and looked at the six dossiers one last time.

Kim, Belle, Dorn, Quentin, Samara, Luster.

These six people were going to be his soldiers.

He lingered for a moment, then let out a small sigh and marked the dossiers with his personal identification code.

Soon, the bureaucracy of the First Evacuation Army would approve the recruitment request.

And then, he would finally meet his new subordinates face to face.

Chapter-823: Six Awakened

Awakened Luster was in a strange mood.

On one hand, his life and career were going better than ever. Not only had he managed to become a member of the special forces, he also received a chance to participate in the most exciting operation of the last several decades!

His status, citizenship rank, and even salary were now higher than he had ever hoped. It was hard to imagine that a guy like him managed to climb so far without being a Legacy or even possessing a combat Aspect. It was certainly better than working in a boring spelltech research facility, which he had been considering before joining the government army.

Plus, he was surrounded by tons of pretty girls every day. There were thousands of them in the port fortress, and even more in the greater encampment beyond. With his dashing uniform, reputation of a valiant elite, and irresistible personality, many of them paid Luster special attention.

Overall, things were great!

…On the other hand, the world seemed to be falling apart. The exciting operation he was so enthused about could very well become his last.

'What a bummer.'

Sitting on a broken panel of a discarded prefab building, Luster watched the swarm activity in the camp below and sipped his coffee. That was another thing… once they shipped to the Southern Quadrant, luxuries like coffee would probably become scarce. He would have to go back to synthetic substitutes, or even worse, drink something as disgusting as tea!

'The horror!'

Luster grimaced, then glanced at the plain-looking young woman sitting next to him.

"What do you think, Kimmy? Are we going to receive our assignments today?"

Awakened Kim hesitated for a bit, then said in an awkward tone:

"I, uh… I don't know?"

Luster shook his head. Kimmy was the strangest person he had ever met. This timid girl was the only Awakened he knew… who somehow managed to not look hot! As far as he was concerned, that was a bizarre accomplishment. Every Awakened was hot. That was just common knowledge.

…Every one except for Kimmy. She single-handedly destroyed Luster's whole worldview. He just did not know what to make of that fact.

Belle, who was perching on the same prefab panel, looked at them and flashed a smile.

"I think we will."

Luster felt a rush of excitement.

"Oh, do you know something?"

The blond daredevil leaned forward, then said in a hushed tone:

"I heard from my pal in logistics that Soul Reaper finalized the command structure of her unit yesterday. That means they'll start recruiting today. After that is done, the other elite units will be free to pick out the rest of us."

'Hell yeah!'

Luster grinned, remained silent for a bit, and then sighed wistfully.

"I know that the chances are slim, but wouldn't it be great to be picked by Soul Reaper's unit? Just imagine… Ascended Jet, she's such a ba…"

Before he had the chance to finish his sentence, their communicators suddenly received a notification.

The strange part of it was that all three lit up simultaneously.

Kimmy was the first to read the message. Her eyes widened.

Seeing her reaction, Luster felt his heart sinking.

"Kimmy? W—what is it?"

She lingered for a moment, and then showed him the screen.

"First… First Irregular Company! We've been assigned to Soul Reaper's unit! It's actually her!"

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Luster, Kimmy, and Belle left their observation spot and headed toward the training facility where they had been ordered to gather by the end of the hour.

They were a strange trio. Sure, each was considered an elite, but in usual circumstances, a combat specialist like Belle would not have been keeping company with two younger support operators. Unless they were members of his cohort, of course, which neither Luster nor Kimmy were.

The Antarctica campaign, however, had changed a lot of things.

While troop movements in the waking world were happening on a massive scale, something similar, but less noticeable, was currently happening in the Dream Realm. The Awakened assigned to the First Evacuation Army were hastily relocating to larger and better protected Citadels, so that a sudden attack of Nightmare Creatures could not disrupt their deployment in Antarctica.

Some were going to government Citadels, while some were going to

impregnable Legacy strongholds like Bastion or Ravenheart. All across the Dream Realm, thousands of Awakened were participating in this quiet exodus.

Luster, Kimmy, and Belle had just happened to reside in the same general area of the Dream Realm. The Awakened serving the government banded together to brave the wilderness and reach Bastion, forming a large caravan that only grew bigger as it passed various Citadels.

Eventually, a couple hundred Awakened all traveled together while their physical bodies were being relocated to various ports, locked inside the sleeping pods.

It was a weird thing. Luster had fallen asleep in one place, but woke up thousands of kilometers south of it. In any case, in the month that it had taken him to reach Bastion on foot, he and the two other elite specialists traveling with the caravan had become somewhat close. They were not really friends, but at least knew each other.

That could not be said about the other three Awakened they met after reaching the reinforced prefab building.

Luster's face grew a little dim when he realized that two of them were dudes. The third one, however…

'Wow!'

The tall, gorgeous redhead was a real bombshell! Sure, she seemed unapproachable and older than him by a good decade… but that only added to her charm…

Belle lightly tapped the young man on the shoulder.

"Get your head out of the gutter, fool."

Luster blinked a couple of times, then looked at the swordsman with a sheepish smile.

"Oh… sorry."

Kimmy glanced at the two of them with confusion and said quietly:

"I… I think I know her. That is Awakened Samara. When I trained to receive the technician certificate, she taught the spelltech introduction class to us."

She squirmed a little, then approached the tall woman and forced out a small smile.

"Instructor Samara. I—it is so nice to see you again."

The aloof beauty glanced at the meek young woman and nodded.

"...You can call me Sam. We are colleagues now."

Kimmy froze for a moment.

"Yes! I will, Instructor Samara. I mean… uh… Instructor Sam."

She blushed a little, and then gestured at her two companions.

"These are Awakened Belle and Awakened Luster. We traveled to Bastion together."

Samara looked at the two men, then said in an emotionless tone:

"These are Awakened Quentin and Awakened Dorn. We just met."

The six elites studied each other for some time.

Eventually, Belle scratched the back of his head and asked:

"Uh… does anyone know who our commanding officer is?"

Chapter-824: Mysterious Master

Nobody was sure who exactly the Ascended in charge of their new cohort was. Nevertheless, after briefly getting acquainted, the six Awakened couldn't help but wonder.

Quentin, the handsome warrior with a gallant demeanor, seemed thoughtful.

"Master Sunless… I don't think I have ever heard of him. There is no Ascended of that name among those who had been with the government for a long time, that I am sure of."

He lingered for a moment, and then added with slight reluctance:

"I did hear a few rumors, though."

Luster looked at him with a lively smile.

"Come on, then, don't leave us hanging!"

Quentin sighed, clearly uncomfortable to be participating in something that could be amounted to gossip. Eventually, however, his curiosity won over decorum:

"Well, it's not much. I just heard that Master Jet deliberately postponed the formation for the First Irregular Company to give this gentleman enough time to arrive. And that she personally recruited him."

Luster blinked a couple of times. If Soul Reaper had gone out of her way to make sure that the guy joined her unit, then he had to be a beast!

Belle confirmed his suspicion:

"I actually heard that Ascended Sunless is a real monster. A demon of

a fighter with a wild, bloodthirsty streak. Apparently, he killed four hundred Awakened abominations… as a Sleeper. Some even say that he hunted down an ancient Fallen Devil before Awakening."

A strange silence settled in the training gymnasium.

Luster scoffed.

"Yeah, right… that's impossible."

Samara, who had remained mostly silent before that, suddenly spoke:

"My information is different. From what I've been told, he is a distinguished explorer and academic researcher. His published works are supposed to be available in the government database. They are very extensive exploration reports about dangerous regions of the Dream Realm and the Nightmare Creatures populating them."

That sounded more believable. Explorers of the Dream Realm might not have been the most renowned fighters, but they had to be capable to survive its wild expanse. It would make sense if Soul Reaper wanted to recruit a knowledgeable academic, since the other captains of the First Irregular Company already covered the combat prowess in spades.

Vandal, Mustang, Queen, Knight, and Pride were legends among the government soldiers. Their renown only paled in comparison to the dreaded Soul Reaper herself.

Kimmy suddenly moved and said in a faltering voice:

"I… uh… I heard that he is utterly mad. Some say that he actually comes from the Forgotten Shore, where he lived completely alone in the Dark City for a long time. They even say that Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan once said that he was the only person she was afraid to fight. I mean… it's ridiculous, of course…"

Her voice gradually grew quieter and then trailed off.

After a short and somewhat awkward pause, the giant man, Dorn, spoke in a steady tone:

"Those are all just rumors. I only know that Ascended Sunless is relatively young… however, we don't need to guess. There is a lot that we can assume just from who he chose as the members of his cohort."

Luster craned his neck and looked at the intimidating strongman.

"Yeah? Like what?"

Dorn shrugged.

"Well, for one, our composition is quite telling. We have two offensive fighters, a healer, a ranged specialist, and two support specialists. The cohort seems to be well-rounded, but it lacks means to fulfill several key roles. We don't have a reliable scout, and our defense is comparatively subpar."

He paused for a moment, and then added:

"That suggests that Ascended Sunless is a utility specialist with a scouting Ability. Alternatively, he might be a defense-oriented fighter or simply a believer in an offense-centered military doctrine. He might also possess a powerful Echo that can serve as a defensive bulwark."

Dorn thought for a bit.

"What is especially interesting to me is that he deliberately chose Awakened with higher than usual mental resilience. He also neglected direct combat efficiency in favor of Aspects that possess sufficient longevity. The presence of Awakened Luster only confirms the fact that our commanding officer puts a lot of value in sustainability.

All of that tells me that he has a very mature outlook on combat that is in direct contradiction to his young age."

Luster followed along, surprised that he had not come to these conclusions himself.

'The big guy is wicked smart!'

He cleared his throat, then said:

"Well… he is a Master. Everyone says that the Second Nightmare is the game changer. Who knows what kind of crap he experienced there? Stuff like that can make a person mature real fast."

"Well said."

Luster nodded, pleased to receive a bit of praise, but then almost jumped.

'Wait… who said that?!'

At some point, a seventh person had somehow appeared in the gymnasium without being noticed by any of them. He was of small stature, with flawless ivory skin, black hair, and unfathomable dark eyes. The guy was extremely young, and looked like a porcelain doll. In fact, he was kind of cute… in a strange, unsettling sort of way.

Luster frowned.

'Who's that shorty?'

Then, realizing who was in front of him, he froze.

The new arrival smiled.

"Good morning, Awakened. I am Master Sunless. You can call me Captain Sunless, or simply Captain. From today forward, I will be your commanding officer."

He remained silent for a few moments. Then, his pleasant smile slowly turned strangely ominous.

Captain Sunless stared directly at the six of them and added:

"Yes, I killed four hundred Awakened abominations and hunted down a Fallen Devil as a Sleeper. Yes, I am a distinguished explorer and researcher whose published works are well-known in academic circles. And yes, I indeed come from the Forgotten Shore, where I lived in the Dark City completely alone and went… slightly… mad."

The frightening smile grew a little wider.

"But all of that is in the past. I am utterly sane now. I am not deranged at all. You truly have nothing to worry about!"

Chapter-825: Under Pressure

The next two weeks passed in a blur.

Sunny had so much to do that there was no time to concentrate on any one thing for too long. The First Evacuation Army camp around him was in a similar state, becoming increasingly more hectic and busy as the date of the naval convoy's departure approached.

Luckily, he was more than familiar with having to act fast while enduring immense pressure.

The first thing Sunny did after introducing himself to the members of his cohort was briefly reiterate the key objectives of the upcoming campaign, as well as share several pieces of information about the hardships they would most likely have to endure and the intended role of the First Irregular Company that his soldiers had not been privy to before.

After Sunny finished his briefing, the mood in the empty gymnasium turned somewhat grim. Not wishing to let the six Awakened stew in their apprehension, he immediately transitioned to the next stage of getting to know his subordinates.

Summoning the Cruel Sight, Sunny smiled pleasantly and asked them to attack him, one at a time.

He wanted to kill two birds with one stone by dueling each of the cohort members right off the bat.

First of all, Sunny knew that he had to win their respect. No matter what Master Jet had said, these experienced soldiers were not going to put their trust in him easily. He was young, small, and a complete stranger. Although forging a real bond would take more time and effort, a simple demonstration of strength was a good start.

Secondly, he needed to understand their powers and techniques better. A simple duel was the best way to do that. Sunny had an additional advantage in that regard, since his mastery of Shadow Dance allowed him to learn much faster, and peer much deeper, than almost anyone else.

In the next thirty minutes or so, he ruthlessly demolished each of his subordinates without even breaking a sweat. Although all of them were very good at what they did, his power and skill were simply too domineering.

The only ones who gave Sunny a bit of a problem were Dorn and Samara. The former's Aspect was very insidious when used with sufficient foresight. While Sunny was strong enough to shake off the force of the big man's Aspect, even he had to improvise when subjected to it at exactly the worst and most inconvenient moment.

Samara presented a different challenge. Although her preferred method of combat centered around infusing bullets with charged soul essence, she was perfectly capable of simply forming her essence into projectiles without a tangible medium. Even if these soul darts weren't as fast or far-reaching, fighting her meant being subjected to a constant barrage of explosive energy.

It was a good thing that the gymnasium was built with Awakened in mind. Otherwise, the whole structure might have collapsed.

In any case, neither of them managed to really slow Sunny down. Of course, he took care to exert just enough strength to defeat the members of the cohort in a decisive fashion, but not wound them.

After the six duels were finished, he had a much better understanding of what his subordinates were capable of. Not only had Sunny been able to grasp the core tenets of their battle techniques, he was also very satisfied with adding six nuanced, polished styles to his mental library.

Knowing what to expect from the six Awakened not only allowed him to form a tentative vision of how the cohort would perform in battle and how to command it to achieve the best result, but also helped him come up with an optimized training plan that would turn them

into a semblance of a cohesive fighting force in a short amount of time.

Sadly, four weeks was not nearly enough time to turn seven relative strangers into a truly coordinated battle unit. The insight he had received due to Shadow Dance helped substantially accelerate the process, but the progress was still insufficient. Hopefully, they would reach at least the minimal threshold of mutual understanding by the time the naval convoy reached Antarctica.

After coming up with the plan, Sunny did not linger before putting it in motion.

To his amusement, the training facility assigned to the cohort happened to include seven Dreamscape pods. These were different from the one he had back home, however. Instead of being connected to the public selection of arenas, it was integrated into a closed network operated by the government.

It was also centered around battles with simulated Nightmare Creatures, as opposed to personal duels. Sunny was even able to tune the battle scenarios to fit his goals and personal preferences, to a certain extent.

At first, he was very enthusiastic about this novel method of training, but then grew slightly disappointed with it. Dreamscape was simply incapable of simulating the true madness and dread of the Nightmare Creatures. The illusory monsters they fought were strong and threatening, but lacked the spark of life and the perverse intelligence that made the real deal so deadly.

Illusions were simply incapable of pressuring the cohort enough.

So… Sunny found something else to really pressure his people.

Himself.

After the first few days, he allocated significant time to battles where all six had to contain a single target — their captain. While Sunny looked much less frightening than a Nightmare Creature, his subordinates quickly learned that he was infinitely more terrible.

After an especially intense clash, the six Awakened crawled out of the Dreamscape pods and wandered off to grab a bite and rest for a bit.

Soon, several of them gathered in the staff kitchen attached to the gymnasium. Luster was rubbing the shoulder he had bruised in one of the real-world training sessions as he groaned:

"...devil! He is a devil!"

Sunny, who sat comfortably in his luxurious Memory chair on the other side of the building, studying a topographical map of Antarctica, looked up from the screen of his communicator and grinned.

'That guy is closer to the truth than he thinks...'

Meanwhile, back in the kitchen, Samara glanced at Luster with disapproval and shook her head. Unexpectedly, Kim decided to support the young man:

"Actually, our captain, he… he might really not be a human. I think."

The aloof beauty looked at her with confusion. Exposed to so much attention, Kim shifted uncomfortably.

"That… uh… all humans share common weaknesses. Temple, inner thigh where the artery is close to the skin… and so on. But Captain Sunless, he d—does not. It's like his skull is indestructible, and he doesn't bleed."

Luster's eyes widened.

"See! I am telling you, guys, he is a Nightmare Creature in disguise! We will all die before even reaching Antarctica!"

Samara stared at him for a few moments, and then said nonchalantly:

"You know that he's probably listening, right?"

Luster flinched and almost fell off his chair.

On the other side of the building, Sunny put a hand over his mouth

to stifle a wicked laugh.

Chapter-826: Shopping Spree

While the intense and arduous training slowly taught the members of the cohort how to fight together, Sunny had several other time-sensitive tasks to complete. Keeping up with all these concurrent responsibilities really tested his mental capacity, but there was no other choice than to simply grit his teeth and do it.

Probably the most important of the tasks facing him was to allocate his contribution points and acquire various assets to strengthen the cohort. However, that was not a straightforward issue. After several days of studying how his subordinates fought and getting acquainted with their Memory arsenals, he was finally ready to make some decisions.

To do so, he chose a moment when the three members of the melee vanguard — Belle, Dorn, and Quentin — were busy in the Dreamscape pods, and called his other three subordinates over.

After all, all three of them were specialists in various support fields that had to do with the cohort's equipment. Kim was a technician, Samara was a capable spelltech engineer, while Luster…

Well, Luster was supposed to be an ace pilot. That wasn't really useful in this situation, but what was Sunny supposed to do, leave the poor guy to sulk all alone in a corner?

After consulting with Kim and Samara, he gained a lot of insight into what would be the best way to spend the contribution points.

The Rhino might have seemed like a simple transport vehicle, but it was really so much more. Sunny did not know a lot about war and strategy, but he knew that mobility was one of the most important factors when determining the impact a combat unit could make.

That was especially so for the cohorts of the First Irregular Company,

which were supposed to be elite rapid-response units that had to constantly travel between various flashpoints to provide support to the ground troops.

So, upgrading their APC was of paramount importance.

The question was which aspects of the Rhino had to be upgraded the most.

In the end, Sunny settled on several major upgrades. They were not what he had expected to pick before consulting with the pair of tech specialists. Instead of adding more armor to the Rhino's hull or incorporating a powerful cannon to its forward section, most of the improvements ended up being hidden from sight.

The Rhino received a comprehensive overhaul that replaced its already formidable power reactor with a much more potent alternative, which in turn demanded the whole energy transmission system to be torn out and replaced with a more robust one.

Among other things, this upgrade vastly improved the logistics of the cohort, since the new spelltech reactor did not need mundane fuel and could be charged by Luster instead.

The guy turned out to be useful for something, after all!

The second major upgrade, unexpectedly, centered entirely around the command and communication suite situated in the rear of the vehicle. Sunny had not paid it much attention before, but after receiving input from Kim, he understood how important it was to get his hands on a better system.

With all the Gates opening in Antarctica, communicating with other units and the command HQ of the Evacuation Army was going to quickly turn into hell. Being able to maintain a stable connection was even more important for the Irregulars, since the cohorts were meant to act semi-independently while being coordinated by Master Jet from a distance.

Luckily, the upgraded reactor was capable of supplying a lot of juice to the communication suite, so Sunny could easily replace it with a

much more advanced and powerful system that, hopefully, would have no problem punching through the mass of interference.

The added external antennas, both the comically tall telescopic one and the more modest parabolic one, could be retracted and hidden beneath the armor at any moment.

The third upgrade was the most esoteric and abstruse. It involved extremely advanced spelltech applications which Sunny did not really understand, so he simply told Samara to choose the best option.

It had to do with shielding and insulating the core systems of the APC from the detrimental effects that the Nightmare Gates produced. Everyone knew that Gates messed with technology and electronics in weird ways, but very few people understood how and why.

Considering the nature of the Chain of Nightmares, Sunny had to make sure that the Rhino would not simply stall and die in the middle of nowhere for no apparent reason. So, even though it cost him a painful amount of contribution points, he chose to acquire the most expensive set of countermeasures available.

Sunny did not shed a tear only because his subordinates were watching.

Before letting the specialists go, he made another acquisition.

Knowing what Samara was capable of with the right armament, he decided to enhance her combat performance by getting his hands on the most powerful mundane weapon available to the members of the First Evacuation Army.

As the result, the cohort became entitled to receive an incredibly powerful — by the standards of mundane soldiers, of course — mechanized rifle.

The thing was made of incredibly tough alloy and included various dampening materials to make its internals more resistant to concussive damage. It was as tall as Samara herself, and possessed a long, fearsome barrel. Sunny initially thought that the rifle was a railgun, but was corrected and found out that it was actually a

different type of a mass driver known as a coil gun, or Gauss rifle.

He had heard all those words before, but had no idea what the difference was. Not that it mattered. All he needed to know was that the rifle was incredibly powerful and capable of propelling solid slugs forward with stunning speed. It could also fire them in two modes — subsonic and supersonic — which could be useful if the cohort ever wanted to remain discreet.

Technically, the rifle was too heavy and powerful to be wielded by a human. It was meant to be utilized by a soldier encased in a full exoskeleton armor suit, or even serve as a light weapon for the smaller humanoid war platforms. But as an Awakened, Samara was just strong enough to manage.

After making this acquisition, Sunny let the three specialists go and rubbed his palms together.

Then, he went forward and spent his remaining contribution points on miscellaneous items… and, more importantly, better Memories for his soldiers.

As a mad grin appeared on Sunny's face, his eyes shone with greedy light.

Staring at his communicator, he couldn't help but laugh.

"Ungrateful brats… daddy brought you gifts, hehe!"

Chapter-827: Daunting Task

Sunny spent a lot of time considering what was the best use of the contribution points allocated to him by the army, as far as Memories were concerned.

He had no doubt that the cohort was going to encounter hordes of Nightmare Creatures in Antarctica. Hopefully, he and his soldiers would survive… which also meant that they would receive a lot of Memories, and eventually even Echoes, throughout the campaign.

Still, most of those abominations were going to be either Dormant or Awakened. How powerful of a Memory could killing such a creature bring? Additionally, any boon received in battle was bound to be arbitrary. Even if it possessed considerable power, who was to say that this power was going to fit the members of the cohort well?

So, now was his best and only chance to get his hands on potent Memories that perfectly suited his soldiers and himself.

However, nothing was ever simple.

Despite the fact that the government had been extremely generous, outfitting six Awakened, let alone a Master, was not cheap. If Sunny had not spent the lion's share of contribution points on upgrading the Rhino, he might have been able to acquire a good amount of powerful tools. As it stood, he was desperately short on funds.

This was why he had to make several painful decisions. Firstly, he gave up on getting something that he himself could use and chose to concentrate on the needs of his subordinates.

'That really leaves a bad taste in my mouth…'

Sunny let out a mournful sigh. There was just no denying it… his personal arsenal was already a bit too outstanding. He had to console

himself by remembering that his six soldiers were, in a sense, an extension of this arsenal. They were meant to become his most powerful weapons.

So, empowering them was the same as empowering himself.

Secondly, purchasing Echoes were also out of the question. Although there were plenty to choose from, the cost was just too high. Sunny might have considered getting one if he could turn it into a Shadow, but he already knew that he had to possess the corresponding shadow in his Soul Sea to transform an Echo.

So, his main goal was to enhance the equipment of his soldiers in a meaningful way.

Sadly, even that was mostly out of his reach now.

…That was if Sunny did not cheat, of course.

'But why wouldn't I?'

An ominous smile appeared on his face.

Sunny was in a unique position to get most of what he wanted while spending a vastly smaller amount of contribution points than anyone else would have had to shell out. After all... he was an aspiring sorcerer.

Purchasing dozens of powerful Memories might have been out of his reach, but with some luck, he would not need to. Requesting a powerful Ascended sword for Belle would consume a considerable chunk of his remaining contribution points, for example.

But purchasing a Dormant weapon with a suitable enchantment would not. All he had to do was study its weave, and then transplant the enchantment on the swordsman's current blade.

In other words, Sunny planned to treat the Memories he purchased as building blocks of powerful tools, as opposed to tools themselves. That way, he could get much more value from the contribution points in his possession.

The only disadvantage of this approach was that it would immensely burden Sunny in the coming weeks. Nevertheless, he was willing to try. Even if not all of his attempts of transplanting weaves were going to succeed, he was confident that a sufficient amount would… if he chose the right ingredients, of course.

Sunny studied the vast list of available Memories for a while, then sighed and left the gymnasium. He had to inspect the goods personally. Sometimes, it was easy to forget that most Awakened did not enjoy his ability to peer into the very essence of Memories and receive a handy description of what each enchantment was supposed to do from the Spell.

That was something that consuming a drop of ichor that had fallen from Weaver's eye gifted him, and while there surely were Aspects that allowed a select number of people to do something similar, most Awakened simply had to rely on vague feeling and experimentation to unlock the full potential of their Memories.

It took some convincing to make happen, but eventually, Sunny was allowed into the main armory of the army encampment. There, he found several dozen of Awakened busy with paperwork instead of thousands of Memories resting on the shelves, waiting to be allocated to various units.

The logistics of the whole system were a true nightmare, since Memories could only be transferred in person.

As the result, each was assigned to an Awakened supply officer who served as a walking arsenal and was supposed to personally deliver the chosen Memory to the recipient when requested. Sunny would have looked like a complete fool if he demanded each of these officers to manifest their entire inventories for his perusal, not to mention that such a thing would take forever to complete.

Luckily, he had narrowed his selection to a comparatively short list of Memories that were both cheap and had great potential. Now, he just had to take a look at them to make sure that the weaves were suitable and easy enough to copy.

Sunny had a lot of goals, ranging from comparatively simple to

achieve to those that required a great effort on his part and could end in failure.

For example, there was a Dormant Memory that came in the shape of a straight razor. Its only enchantment, according to the description in the government database, made it extremely sharp. Trying to hack and slash Nightmare Creatures with the tiny blade was a recipe for disaster, but what if he could imbue Belle's sword with the same unnatural sharpness?

There was a cloak that had no other purpose than to make its wearer weigh less by a couple of kilograms. In and of itself, the enchantment was not too useful, but what if he applied it to Dorn's unwieldy sledgehammer?

Better yet, what if he managed to transplant the [Feather of Truth] enchantment of the Mantle of the Underworld to it? Even though Sunny still had trouble working with complex weaves of Ascended Memories, he felt that he had a solid chance of success.

What if he could purchase six cheap charms, and enhance each of them with resistance to cold that the Memory of Ice provided? Thankfully, he could spend his contribution points to receive souls shards required for these manipulations, as well.

Of course, the task was daunting and complicated. Not only did Sunny have to collect all the necessary ingredients, spend a lot of time and essence to create countless strings of essence, study the new weaves, and actually succeed in replicating them… he also had to take other factors into account.

The difference between passive and active enchantments, the capacity of the Memories being changed, the rate at which his Awakened soldiers would have to expend their limited reserves of essence to maintain the more powerful effects, the synergy between them… all of these concerns were enough to drive a person mad.

Not to mention that he only had several weeks to achieve this ambitious goal while simultaneously overseeing the training of the cohort and performing other important tasks.

He would probably improve his nascent mastery of sorcery, at least.

Staring at the confused supply officers, Sunny rubbed his face and groaned.

'So much to do… damn, is being a captain always so stressful?'

Chapter-828: The Call

Several days later, Sunny was sitting in the mess hall of the military bunker, consuming a generous portion of food without too much enthusiasm. A couple of other captains of the First Irregular Company, as well as Master Jet herself, ate with a bit more appetite.

Sunny did not look too good. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his whole presence was subdued and listless, a telling sign that someone was running low on essence.

At some point, Winter gave him a dubious look and asked:

"What's up with you? You look like you're about to topple over."

Sunny waved a hand dismissively.

"...It's nothing. I'm just tired because of all the stuff I have to do before we depart. Being an army officer is not a breeze, as it turns out. Who could have thought?"

The woman stared at him for a few moments, then grinned.

"Oh, right. I forgot that this is your first command posting. You have yet to discover the wonders of delegation!"

Master Randall shook his head.

"There are many things that can't be delegated. Plus, you have to know what your subordinates can handle to assign them tasks. I think that you are doing fine, kid."

Sunny wanted to retort that he was not a kid, but thought better of it after glancing at the grizzled veteran. Vandal was almost old enough to be his grandfather. If anyone had the right to regard him as a junior, it was Master Randall.

Winter shrugged.

"That's true. I am actually impressed by the cohort you've managed to form. It is unexpectedly well-rounded, although I am surprised by several of the choices you made."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Really? Why?"

She leaned back and looked at him. Well… Sunny assumed that she was looking at him. In truth, the laid-back beauty could have been staring at anything from behind her old-fashioned sunglasses.

"Don't get me wrong, each of us has tried to create a cohort that can remain effective in all kinds of situations. But we have our biases, nevertheless, so every cohort except yours tends to lean toward a certain specialization. Take Pride, for example. That slippery bastard recruited all the stealthy creeps from the roster."

Sunny stared at her without amusement.

"...You do know that I am a creep myself, right?"

Then, he froze for a moment.

"Wait, that didn't come out right! What I meant to say was that I specialize in stealth, as well."

Winter snorted.

"Really? You don't really look like a backstabber."

Sunny crossed his arms and looked at her with a smirk.

"Well, obviously. If I go around looking like a backstabber, people would be on guard against being stabbed in the back, wouldn't they? That just defeats the purpose."

Master Randall let out a gruff chuckle.

"He makes a good point."

Sunny nodded, then let out a heavy sigh.

"To tell you the truth, I did my fair share of backstabbing in the past, which really helped me survive. But mostly I tend to find myself in situations where I'm surrounded on all sides. Stealth is a powerful tool, but it can only get you so far. So… a well-rounded cohort is the best choice, in my opinion. Luckily, my Aspect is versatile enough to support all kinds of compositions."

He lingered for a bit, then asked with curiosity:

"What do other cohorts specialize in? I've been too busy to keep up with what you guys are doing."

Winter took a bite out of her sandwich, chewed it slowly, and shrugged.

"Ah, the usual. Davis went with the stealthy approach. Venerable Vandal here is all about melee carnage… so is Mustang, with the added emphasis on speed and finesse. I am more of a ranged superiority gal. Dale is a bit like you, but with a slant toward robust defense. As for our courageous leader…"

She looked at Master Jet and smiled.

"...Actually, I have no idea. Her cohort is weird."

Soul Reaper gave them a nonchalant glance.

"It's not that weird. I just picked people who can enhance my own battle performance in various ways. We are meant to wipe out the enemy by channeling our deadliest weapon — me — in the most efficient way."

She remained silent for a few seconds.

"In any case, there are only several days left before we have to board the ships. Once we do, most of our decision power will be gone. Any additional preparations we'll be able to make at sea are going to be limited to a specific direction. So… now is your last chance to account for things you might have missed."

The captains looked at each other with somber expressions. After a long pause, Sunny asked:

"Any suggestions?"

Master Jet thought for a bit.

"You are not too familiar with how Gates affect us, are you?"

He shrugged.

"I know the basics, I guess."

Randall shook his head.

"That is not really enough. For us government officers, a big part of our duty has to do with containing the Nightmare Gates, so we know them the best. You are a Master, so you must have experienced the Call at least once. Correct?"

Sunny cautiously nodded. He had indeed experienced the strange pull that both Gates and Seeds exerted on Awakened. It felt like the Nightmare was calling to him.

The grizzled veteran continued with a scowl:

"Well, the Call does not just affect the mind. It exerts a very substantial influence on reality, as well. Namely, it can mess with your tether and the Dream Realm anchor."

Sunny scratched the back of his head. He knew about that strange anomaly, of course. He had just never encountered it himself.

"How severe is the interference?"

The older Master lingered for a second.

"Not too severe, but it grows worse the closer you get to the Gate. In the immediate area around it, the Call overrides both the tether and the anchor. What it means is that if you decide to jump into the Dream Realm near an active Gate, you will be pulled toward its Seed instead of your Citadel. Same goes for the Awakened who fall asleep

in the vicinity."

He paused, and then added:

"Actually, we often make use of that property. If a Gate manifests in a populated area and needs to be closed quickly, we can dispatch a cohort of challengers to the Seed through the Call.

A Saint might help out and bring them there immediately, or they can wait until the first wave of Nightmare Creatures is cleared and take a nap… although that is more dangerous, since the challengers will have to search for each other and the Seed in a potentially hostile region of the Dream Realm."

Master Jet sighed.

"That is not important right now. Usually, it is not too difficult to avoid being displaced by the Call. All Awakened have to do is maintain a bit of distance between themselves and the Gate. However…"

Her expression darkened.

"With how many Gates are expected to manifest during the Chain of Nightmares, who knows what the situation will be? We'll have to keep the potential danger in mind and manage the sleep schedule of our soldiers, lest they are whisked away. I advise each of you to stock up on stimulants, at least."

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking. Eventually, he tiredly rubbed his face and said in a somber tone:

"...I'll take that into account."

Chapter-829: Battle Scars

On the second to last day before the departure of the First Evacuation Army, Sunny and his cohort had nothing much to do. The gymnasium they used had actually been dismantled the previous night, so it was impossible for them to continue training.

Of course, Sunny could have come up with an inventive way to put his soldiers through more grief, but he eventually decided against it. Instead, he gathered them on the wall of the port fortress for an improvised picnic.

Leaving the Northern Quadrant was a big occasion, especially considering that they were going to war. This was probably going to be their last chance to relax and enjoy themselves in complete safety, so it would have been a shame to miss it.

The cohort enjoyed a lavish meal consisting of various tasty dishes Sunny had commandeered from the officer's mess hall. There were even beverages that were technically prohibited by army regulations, even though they had very limited effect on Awakened.

The seven of them watched as heavy containers were being loaded on the massive ships in wistful silence. Well… at least six of them did. Luster, meanwhile, was secretly ogling Samara.

After a few moments of silence, the tall woman suddenly said in an even tone:

"What are you staring at?"

The young man flinched and awkwardly looked away.

"That… uh… that's a wicked scar you have! How did you get it, Sam?"

Samara, indeed, had a prominent scar that stretched all the way from her shoulder to her forearm. Since the sleeves of her bodysuit were currently rolled up, a part of it was on display.

She briefly glanced down at her arm, then shrugged.

"When I was around your age, there was a Gate that opened on top of an unfinished city barrier. As one of the closest Awakened to the site, I was among the first responders. We held the Nightmare Creatures off while the construction crews were evacuating. Anyway… there was an explosion, and I was thrown over the edge. Luckily, my arm got caught on some scaffolds.

It hurt like hell, but at least I didn't fall all the way down to the ground and turn into a puddle."

Luster blinked a couple of times, then grinned.

"That's nothing! I actually had my entire right arm bitten off once. A giant stone worm somehow tunneled under the Citadel I was anchored in, and then emerged from underground, swallowing the Gateway in one go. Those of us who survived had to fight it off, but then got stuck on the pieces of rubble, surrounded by a swarm of smaller worms."

He paled a little.

"...Smaller compared to the first one, of course. Each was at least ten meters long, actually. The only good thing about the bastards was that they could only move through soil, so we were safe as long as we remained on top of big chunks of stone. We did so for a couple of weeks. But when our food and water were gone, we had to make a run for it.

I killed an entire worm myself… but not before the damned thing gobbled up my arm!"

Luster was fortunate that he had lost his limb in the Dream Realm. Although it must have caused a lot of damage to his physical body, he had not been crippled for life.

The young man looked around and gave Belle a cocky smile.

"What about you? What's the worst you've been hurt, huh?"

The swordsman thought for a bit.

"Well… I guess it was a few years back. I was stationed at a remote research outpost, all the way out there in the wilderness. We had a Gate open nearby, and the entire facility ended up being overrun. I was pretty much the only one to survive, but the Nightmare Creatures were on my heels. I had no means to contact the HQ, as well, and the nearest human settlement was half a thousand kilometers away."

An amused smile appeared on his face.

"It took me about a month to reach it on foot. The pursuing abominations were easy enough to deal with, but the air… suffice it to say, by the end of it, I was constantly coughing out chunks of my lungs. That was the worst I have been hurt. Luckily, a kind Ascended healer lent a hand to help me recover."

A disturbed silence settled over the cohort. A few moments later, Dorn suddenly snorted.

"That reminds me of my solstice. The very first Nightmare Creature I stumbled upon managed to thoroughly crush both of my legs. I had to drag myself through the mud for two entire weeks of slow, painful crawling to get to the nearest Citadel. That was many years ago, of course, but no abomination has managed to do such a number on me ever since."

Since everyone seemed in the mood to boast about their battle scars, Quentin hesitated for a bit and then decided to share a story, as well:

"I was captured by a Nightmare Creature that looked like a giant spider once. It put me in an impenetrable cocoon and filled it with digestive fluid, to turn me into an easily consumable slushy… as spiders do. The problem was, I was able to heal myself a little bit faster than the acid was dissolving me. Still, after several weeks of that, my patience grew really thin."

Kim looked at him in horror.

"H—how… how did you escape?"

The gallant man smiled.

"Well, while the acid was slowly corroding my body, I was slowly corroding the cocoon. It gave out before I did, fortunately. However, I failed to avenge the other victims and kill the spider… it is still out there, somewhere. I hope we'll meet again, one day."

Kim looked down, and then sighed.

"I… was actually never hurt too badly. There was this one time when my entire cohort contracted a strange plague, though. It was a… a really torturous disease, and it quickly spread to the entire Citadel. Many people died in agony. Eventually, we found out that the plague was a manifestation of a bizarre Terror. Once we did, a Saint of the great clan Song arrived, and somehow managed to destroy it.

I, as well as those who were still alive, were spared."

Luster patted the young woman on the shoulder.

"You did well, Kimmy."

Then, he looked at Sunny, hesitated for a few moments, and cautiously asked:

"Uh… what about you, captain? Have you ever been hurt real bad?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Oh? Let me think… I had my ribcage crushed once, I guess. I was also disemboweled, poisoned, burned, and drowned. One time, I was even burned and drowned at the same time."

Luster blinked.

"How could anyone be burned and drowned at the same time?"

Sunny gave him a lively smile.

"Easy! You just need to be drowned in molten metal. But the very

worst physical wound I have ever received… huh… has to be getting beheaded, I guess? That one really stung. Honestly, I do not recommend getting decapitated, if you can avoid it. It's really not worth it… in most cases…"

The six Awakened were staring at him with strange expressions.

Sunny cleared his throat.

"What? It truly isn't! Trust me, I should know…"

Chapter-830: Departure

The next day, the exodus of the First Evacuation Army from the Northern Quadrant finally started.

Sunny and the other captains observed the mass of humans, machinery, and cargo containers flowing into the seemingly bottomless cargo holds of the forty metal leviathans from the tall walls of the port fortress. None of the six spoke, consumed by somber thoughts. Master Jet remained silent, as well.

Behind them, the large encampment that had been bustling with activity just a few days ago was completely dismantled and gone. In front of them was the endless grey expanse of the sea and an uncertain future.

Even though only a quarter of the entire evacuation contingent was sailing south from this port today, the scope of it all was truly immense. Looking at the fearsome ships and the flood of soldiers boarding them, Sunny couldn't help but feel a bit of awe.

It was easy to believe that nothing would be able to stop such a tremendous force.

…However, he knew better.

After a while, Master Jet sighed.

"Alright. It's time for us to go. Regroup with your cohorts and proceed to your assigned ships. You know what to do if the convoy encounters a disaster on the way. Try your best to survive. Should the flagship go down and I with it, follow the chain of command.

Vandal is going to assume leadership over the company in my absence."

Master Randall glanced darkly at her and grimaced.

"Hopefully, I won't need to."

Even though the convoy was going to be guided by the emissaries of the House of Night, it was not a given that all ships would reach Antarctica. Naval navigation was always dangerous, and most of the Awakened and Ascended of the First Army were all but useless in aquatic combat.

Including Sunny.

Glancing at his colleagues one last time, he stepped through the shadows and appeared near a crowded dock. It was not hard to find the members of his cohort, since most people gave them a bit of space out of respect.

Walking up to them, he put on a confident mask and asked in a relaxed tone:

"Are you ready?"

Everyone nodded… except for Luster, who suddenly seemed concerned.

"Uh… actually, I've never been on a ship. I won't get seasick, right?"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then shrugged.

"You are an Awakened, are you not? Awakened are supposed to be resilient to such things. So… we'll see, I guess."

Luster's face dropped. He lingered for a few moments and sighed.

"...Somehow, I feel like you don't like me very much, captain."

Sunny did not respond. However, Belle suddenly patted the young man on the shoulder.

"Well, I, for one, am very happy that you're with us."

Luster beamed.

"Really?"

The swordsman gave him a friendly smile and nodded.

"Sure. People like you are very valuable to have around. I mean, one look at you, and it's clear that you are going to die first. Which, therefore, means that it won't be me. I feel better already!"

The young man glowered at him and scoffed.

"Don't joke like that. It's not funny."

Belle blinked a couple of times.

"...I wasn't joking."

Meanwhile, Sunny shook his head and turned away to hide a smile.

"Enough talking! Let's go."

Together, they entered the long pier and moved toward the distant ship. The mass of people parted to let them through and then closed behind them like water. It felt a little surreal.

Soon, the solid steel mass of the battleship obscured the sky. Feeling its thick shadow embrace him, Sunny suddenly felt a little calmer.

He glanced at the grey waves below, sighed, and stepped on the wide linkspan connecting the pier to the massive vessel.

A few seconds later, the dark maw of the cargo hold swallowed him and his people.

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Once aboard the ship, the cohort split to perform several tasks. Kim, Luster, and Samara went to check on the supplies allocated to the cohort, including the modified Rhino which had already been stored in a special cradle in one of the lesser cargo holds of the giant vessel for some time.

Since they had had no access to it prior to today, there was a

multitude of checks and diagnostics they had to run.

Belle, Dorn, and Quentin followed one of the ship's logistical officers to secure the living quarters for the cohort and get the lay of the land, while Sunny wandered off to the upper deck.

There, he walked close to the edge and leaned on the tall handrail, looking down at the distant surface of the water. Images of the Forgotten Shore and the dark sea rose from the depths of his memory, making him shiver.

As Sunny waited for the fleet to depart, his shadows explored the battleship. Even if he would not be too useful should a swarm of Nightmare Creatures or some colossal horror of the depths attack the convoy once in transit, he was still determined to memorize every nook and cranny of this giant steel coffin… just in case.

The prospect of handing his life into the hands of strangers did not appeal to Sunny, to say the least, but he did not have a lot of choice. For the next two to three weeks, the crew of the battleship and the Nightwalkers in charge of the convoy were going to decide whether all of them lived or died.

'Curses…'

Sunny was suddenly very unhappy with the fact that he did not acquire any powerful swimming-related Memories. Even if they could only give him an illusion of being safe, it would have been still better than nothing.

'Maybe I should make it a priority once we reach Antarctica. I doubt that this is the last time I have to traverse vast amounts of water. Come to think of it… isn't it strange that I, of all people, have neglected seafaring so much? After spending so much time trying to escape the dark sea, even a complete fool would have learned to respect water…'

But maybe that was the reason. On the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had grown very accustomed to equating depths to death. He had never considered the sea as anything else because of that.

Slowly, the last stragglers of the First Evacuation Army boarded the metal leviathans. The gates of the cargo holds were closed, the hatches were fastened. Massive chains rattled as the anchors were raised.

The whole battleship beneath him vibrated as its mighty reactors came to life. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, the convoy started to move. Forty mountains of alloy and steel sailed forward, their bows cutting the waves like giant blades. Thousands of people moved in their metal bellies, breathing life into the iron beasts.

Sunny looked as the port fortress slowly grew smaller and smaller. Soon, the shore became veiled in a murky haze.

The First Evacuation Army had left the Northern Quadrant.

Chapter-831: Master Naeve

After a while, nothing surrounded the convoy but the vast expanse of rolling waves. The forty colossal vessels moved in a narrow formation, with the fearsome flagship serving as the arrowhead of the expeditionary fleet. Hundreds of formidable cannons were aimed in all directions, their fields of fire overlapping to create a lethal exclusionary zone around the procession.

Nevertheless, Sunny was not reassured.

He stared at the undulating surface below for some time, a dark expression never leaving his face. Despite the grandiose magnitude of their passage, the convoy moved with a surprising measure of quietness. If not for the sound of water being displaced by the mighty bows and splashing against the alloy armor, Sunny could have closed his eyes and imagined that there were no other ships around him.

Wasn't it strange that he had felt much more comfortable aboard flying ships than these far more reliable seafaring vessels?

He sighed, then activated his communicator and accessed the maritime safety procedures manual provided to each member of the First Army. In the past weeks, everyone had to study the sizable document and run a few exhausting drills to familiarize themselves with the strange rules of proper naval conduct.

Sunny had a better memory than most, so he practically learned the manual by heart. While its general structure was rather easy to understand and explained what passengers of the ships had to do if a ship or fleet-wide alert was issued, there were a lot of strange and seemingly esoteric rules included, as well.

For example, the manual had passages like "if you start to experience recurring nightmares or experience persistent auditory hallucinations, report to the nearest navy officer immediately" or "in case of alert

level being raised to Condition Black, cease all activity and motion; do not produce any sounds, disturbances, or vibrations; do not summon Memories and above all else do not actively circulate soul essence", and so on.

There were several alert levels, differentiated by their color. Condition Black was among the highest and most dire, inferior only to Condition Red, which meant that the whole fleet had to prepare for an all-out battle. However, there were plenty of regulations that fell outside these established routines.

Even though Sunny had no idea what most of these rules were supposed to prevent from happening, he felt a little bit calmer knowing them.

'Ships move between the Quadrants all the time. Hell, there are even some that constantly travel between West Antarctica and South America. There's no reason to worry too much.'

He sighed, then shook his head dejectedly and decided to leave the upper deck. Whether Sunny liked it or not, he was going to have to spend the next several weeks at sea. Letting paranoia get the best of him would not do anyone any good.

There was a lot for him to accomplish, still, from checking up on the Rhino to finding out what kind of facilities would be available to the cohort during this dangerous cruise, and implementing changes to the training plan. Not to mention the fact that he had to continue upgrading and augmenting the Memories of his soldiers.

As he walked toward the nearest hatch, Sunny suddenly spotted a lone figure standing at the bow of the ship, gazing at the vast expanse of water as he himself had been just a minute ago.

The man was tall and wore a midnight blue coat that moved slightly in the wind. Beneath it was a black bodysuit much like the one Sunny was wearing, but also slightly different. It was made out of a strange material and looked much more like a wetsuit than a garment meant to be worn under armor.

Although the stranger stood some distance away, Sunny could

somehow feel his presence all the way near the hatch. It was subdued, deep, and mysterious… tantalizing, even.

Sunny had no doubt that he was looking at another Master.

He hesitated for a few moments, then shrugged and decided to approach the unfamiliar Ascended. As he did, the man turned around and glanced at Sunny with a wary gaze.

He was around thirty years old, handsome, and with eyes of an unusual, beautiful indigo color. Strangely enough, his black hair also seemed to possess slight accents of dark blue, at least when exposed to direct sunlight. This close, the feeling of mystifying depth radiating from the stranger was more pronounced, as if most of him was hidden from sight.

Sunny already had an idea of who he was looking at. He thought for a bit, and then simply said:

"Good day. I am Ascended Sunless of the First Awakened Irregular Company."

The man lingered for a moment, studying him. His indigo eyes seemed to be searching for something.

…Then, unexpectedly, a wide smile appeared on his handsome face.

"Ah! I am Ascended Naeve, of the House of Night."

He stared at Sunny with a strange expression for a few moments, and then suddenly blurted out:

"Are you crazy?!"

Sunny blinked a couple of times. Naeve, meanwhile, laughed and waved his hand in the air a couple of times.

"Sorry, sorry! I didn't… it's just that my daughter is your biggest fan!"

'...What?'

Utterly flabbergasted, Sunny stared at the scion of the famed great

clan Night while trying his best to appear calm and composed. Eventually, he shifted slightly and forced out a question:

"How… old is your daughter, if I may ask?"

Naeve smiled.

"She's five. A Song of Light and Darkness is her favorite movie… she must have watched it a hundred times! The censored version, of course. She just adores your character. You're her idol! Ah… I really do apologize, Master Sunless.

Please forgive my lack of decorum. I just… got excited."

The scion of the House of Night remained silent for a few moments, then suddenly produced a piece of synthetic paper and a pen from somewhere and offered them to Sunny.

Sunny looked down with a deadpan expression and raised an eyebrow.

"Uh… what am I supposed to do with these?"

Master Naeve stared at him for a long, awkward moment.

"That… can I get an autograph? Please. You know, to earn some points with my daughter…"

Chapter-832: Heirs of the Storm

Sunny knew how to write, of course. That said, he certainly did not have a lot of experience writing by hand, let alone had a signature — simply because people at large, and especially those in the outskirts, almost never used paper and pens to relay information. Why would they, if everything was usually stored digitally?

However, he was in a better position than most. Out there in the Dream Realm, many long-abandoned traditions had found a new life, so Sunny managed to scribble down his name on the piece of synthetic paper with at least some semblance of finesse.

Handing it back to Master Naeve of Night, he smiled awkwardly.

"Here. I… hope your daughter likes it."

The scion of the great clan received the piece of paper with gratitude and hid it in the pocket of his coat.

"Thank you very much. I am away a lot, so this will go a long way. Next time I see her, she will probably already be six… and terribly peeved that I've been gone for so long. Coming back with a present is bound to help!"

He looked at Sunny with genuine mirth. Then, a knowing spark gleamed in his strange indigo eyes.

Naeve gestured at the ocean and asked:

"You are not too comfortable on water, are you?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then scoffed.

"You must have seen the movie yourself. Is it really a surprise that I have a complicated relationship with the sea?"

The handsome Master smiled.

"Oh, yes. I haven't thought about that, sorry. Still… at least you are familiar with it. Most people just don't understand."

He did not have to say what exactly it was that people failed to understand. For a moment, the two men shared a strange feeling of closeness. Both had known the unfathomable dread of the depths, which was a rare thing these days.

Sunny sighed, then studied the massive silhouettes of the iron ships for a few moments, and asked:

"So… what are our chances of making it to Antarctica alive?"

Naeve laughed.

"Well… I wouldn't worry too much if I were you. Sure, anything can happen. But this convoy is as safe as we can make it."

He pointed to the especially fearsome dreadnought that moved in front of the fleet.

"There is a Saint of the House of Night aboard the flagship. There are several Nightwalkers such as I spread around the other ships. There are also at least one cohort of experienced Awakened warriors of my clan on each vessel. We know what we are doing, so… very few things can threaten the fleet. It will reach Antarctica, have no doubt."

The scion of the great clan lingered for a moment, then added in a more somber tone:

"We will have to make the journey many times, bringing the refugees away and returning with reinforcements for the government army. Each of the four fleets was made to be nearly indestructible. Still… that doesn't mean that our passengers can relax. Keep your wits about you, Master Sunless, and do remember the rules formulated in the safety manual. We put them there for a reason."

Sunny looked at the handsome man and smiled.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that. I have already memorized

the whole thing, more or less. I may be lacking in many regards, but being unreasonably paranoid is not one of them."

Naeve smiled.

"That is a truly remarkable trait to have. I wish more people were that unreasonable..."

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Sunny chatted with the Nightwalker for a few more minutes before taking his leave. Master Naeve had turned out to be unexpectedly friendly and pleasant to be around. He was not at all like the arrogant representatives of the other great Legacy clans.

By the end of their talk, Sunny felt a lot better about his current circumstances. He had also grown a bit fascinated with the House of Night.

The third great clan had always been a mystery to him. Nightwalkers did not enjoy the patronage of a Sovereign, but wielded an irreplaceable power. That unique advantage had carved a place for them at the very top of human hierarchy.

But what was that advantage, exactly?

After meeting a scion of the great clan Night in person, Sunny all but confirmed his suspicion. The feeling Naeve gave him was somewhat similar to what he had experienced twice before — one time in the shrine at the fourth level of the Ebony Tower, the other time in the great hall of the Night Temple.

Both were dedicated to Storm God — the deity of depths, oceans, darkness, stars, travel, guidance, and disaster. The aspects of the Goddess of the Black Skies were all eerily related to the role the House of Night played in human society, and Sunny did not think that it was a coincidence.

His previous guess seemed to have been correct. It was all but certain now that the founder of the great clan, an enigmatic Awakened of the First Generation known as Nightwalker, had inherited the lineage of Storm God and somehow shared its power with the rest of the House

of Night.

'So, then… all six divine lineages are accounted for?'

House of Night had inherited the lineage of Storm God.

Immortal Flame had inherited the lineage of Sun God.

Valor had inherited the lineage of War God.

Song had most likely inherited the lineage of Beast God — that was clear from what he knew about Seishan, the adopted daughter of Ki Song.

Sunny had been meant to inherit the lineage of Shadow God, but it was devoured by Blood Weave.

That only left the most elusive of the six divinities, Heart God… and the most elusive of the Sovereigns, Asterion?

Of course, Sunny could be wrong. Ki Song might have been the heir of Heart God, instead, while Asterion might have been the heir of Beast God, or lacked a lineage entirely.

But what were the chances?

'That is all great. But what the hell does it all mean?'

What were divine lineages, exactly? Did they have any purpose except for bestowing their wielders with additional power? Were they just chance remnants of ancient bloodlines, or something that had been left behind for a reason?

More importantly, now that one of the six divine bloodlines had been hijacked by the forbidden lineage of a meddling daemon… how would that affect things?

Sunny had no idea.

Shaking his head, he descended into the metal depths of the giant battleship and reunited with his shadows, which had been exploring the vessel all that time.

'One way or another, I will find out later. Right now, however… I should really go and take a look at the Rhino.'

Sunny hastened his steps and scowled.

'After all the contribution points I sank into it, the damned thing better be good…'

Chapter-833: Rhino

The vehicle stable of the battleship took up a whole lesser cargo hold. Calling it lesser, of course, did not do the space justice — it was a vast metal hall filled with all types of heavy machinery and bustling human activity.

Feeling the floor sway slightly beneath him, Sunny walked along various cradles, each holding a powerful engine of war, until he reached the one assigned to his cohort. There, he finally saw the Rhino.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, studying the formidable vehicle.

The armored personnel carrier was angular and stocky, with heavy plates of composite alloy armor covering its solid frame. Its design was stout, sleek, and strangely predatory. The whole machine was almost the size of a train car, with six mighty wheels supporting its overbearing weight.

Each massive wheel was as tall as a human and as tough as the alloy hull of the Rhino. A lot of engineering went into making the APC as mobile as possible — not only were the wheels connected to an extremely robust suspension system, they were also attached to a set of short integrated limbs that could be extended from the frame of the vehicle to raise its profile and maneuverability.

The APC also possessed powerful boosters that allowed it to sustain brief bursts of autonomous levitation, hop over short distances, or soften the blow of landing from height. It could even move across water as an amphibious vessel… not that Sunny had any plans to do so.

The feature that gave the Rhino its peculiar name was a massive steel wedge that was raised slightly above its wide snout. This plow could

be lowered down to the ground, turning the APC into a semblance of a heavy siege ram.

With this sharp catcher lowered, the alloy beast looked like it was capable of tearing through walls, piles of debris, natural obstacles, and the flesh of the Nightmare Creatures with equal ease.

Sunny studied it with a dark sense of glee.

'Well, alright. I have to admit… it does look good.'

He lowered his eyes and looked at Kim and Samara, who were busy inspecting the vehicle. He walked over to his technicians and asked in a neutral tone:

"So, what's the status?"

Samara glanced up from the screen of her communicator, where a diagnostic program was displaying the results of a series of complicated tests. She offered him a small smile.

"Everything seems to be in order, Captain. He's a real beast."

Kim affectionately patted the surface of the APC, which had been painted in a grey camouflage pattern.

"This is a superb machine. Rhino is really fast despite being burdened by heavy armor, highly maneuverable, and has exceedingly durable internals. With the expensive upgrades we procured, he has become nothing short of a beast, indeed."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, coming to terms with the fact that his personnel carrier was, apparently, a "he".

Kim, meanwhile, shifted from foot to foot and said in a tentative tone:

"Uh… would you like to take a look inside, Captain?"

Sunny looked at her nonchalantly and shrugged.

"Sure."

'Of course I want to take a look inside! What kind of question is that?!'

He entered the Rhino through an opened hatch, climbed a set of steep steps, and found himself in the interior of the massive vehicle.

Everything there was spartan, highly utilitarian, and designed with maximum durability in mind. It was clear that he was inside a military machine… and yet, Sunny couldn't help but feel that he was surrounded by pure luxury.

Maybe it was because he knew how much all this seemingly unassuming equipment cost.

The front of the Rhino was dedicated to a slightly raised pilot's cabin, where Luster was currently studying various control panels and switches with an excited expression. There was enough space in there for a couple of additional seats, as well. The reinforced windshield was long and narrow, but offered almost a panoramic view of the surroundings.

Of course, there were plenty of monitors displaying the feeds from various external cameras and sensors, as well.

The middle of the vehicle was dedicated to a modest living space. There was a small lounge area where the crew could rest and spend time together, a compact galley, and a partitioned hygiene compartment. Six sleeping nooks were situated on the opposing walls. Sunny could already imagine the competition for who would get the bottom bunks.

Of course, each of these "bunks" could actually function as a dedicated sleeping pod, should the need arise.

Behind the lounge area was a cargo hold that also served as the armory and integrated a high-tech engineering workstation. The engineering compartment itself was situated below the floor and ran the whole length of the vehicle.

Finally, the very back of the Rhino was taken by the command and communication suite. There was a large holographic table, a

powerful console connected to the antennae array of the APC, and a set of monitors that received the same input as the ones in the pilot's cabin.

Most importantly, behind all that was an alcove where Sunny's own bed was situated, complete with a privacy partition and a dedicated storage space.

The mattress was the very best the First Evacuation Army could offer.

He grinned, imagining how pleasant it would be to sleep on that thing.

'This is actually better than what I have back home…'

Such an addition was not simply to please the officers. As an Ascended, Sunny possessed an ability that his soldiers lacked — he did not have to travel to the Dream Realm every time he fell asleep.

What it actually meant was that his soldiers were going to be utterly defenseless while they slept. Even if a swarm of Nightmare Creatures attacked the Rhino, they would not wake up. He was the only one who could guard the cohort no matter what happened.

A staggered sleeping schedule was supposed to help with this problem to a degree, but Sunny had no illusions about how often he would get the opportunity to properly rest. Which meant that the rare occasions when he did get a chance to take a nap had to be as comfortable and efficient as possible.

Sunny walked around the Rhino for a bit, trying to suppress a satisfied grin as he studied the layout. Eventually, he approached his personal alcove and sat down on the soft bed.

There, he glanced at his shadows and smiled.

"Not bad, huh?"

The shadows stared at him silently. A few moments later, the happy one energetically raised both hands, showing him two thumbs.

Sunny nodded.

"Yes… indeed. I like it, too!"

Chapter-834: Cohesion

Over the next few days, Sunny slowly grew somewhat accustomed to life aboard a giant, floating metal coffin. Of course, the thought of being separated from the bottomless abyss of dark water by just a few layers of alloy was not too comforting… but at least he did not think about it too much anymore.

What helped Sunny the most was the fact that he was simply too busy to entertain frivolous thoughts.

His schedule was packed to the limit. There was so much he had to do…

Most of his days were still dedicated to trying to improve the level of cooperation between the members of the cohort. Now that they had left the Northern Quadrant, there was no spacious gymnasium for them to practice in. The Dreamscape pods were a thing of the past now, too.

Of course, there were some facilities available on the giant battleship, as well as the whole upper deck, but none of it was sufficient to put six elite Awakened fighters through the paces. Still, there was a lot they could do to learn how to work well together.

From low-intensity training to mental exercises and games, anything that could give the members of the cohort a glimpse into how their comrades thought and acted was a step in the right direction. Sunny's insights that he had gained thanks to Shadow Dance helped a lot, as well.

Slowly but surely, his soldiers were clicking together and learning how to fight side by side. Belle's swift and mercurial nature, Dorn's solid and calculated approach, Quentin's stalwart persistence, Samara's steadiness and deadly aim, Kim's mastery of sight and quiet competence, Luster's spirit and inexhaustible bravado… guided by

Sunny, all of it was slowly melding together.

The cohort had not reached the point where they could move as a single organism yet, but at least they were already able to reinforce each other's strengths while simultaneously covering each other's weaknesses.

Sunny had gained a deeper understanding of their powers, as well. For example, Belle's ability to sharpen his sword was actually more complicated than he had thought — as it turned out, the actual effect surrounded the blade with an incredibly thin, invisible displacement field instead of actually making the edge sharper.

Kimmy could not only share visual perception between several people, but also mix and match it as the situation demanded. She could see the weaknesses of the enemy, but simply channeling her point of view to a fighter in the middle of furious battle would have been too disorienting.

Instead, she was able to transfer only the vision of the vulnerabilities, almost like a composite overlay that lighted the chosen spots up.

Luster could speed up the soul essence recovery, both for himself and his allies. Strangely enough, the better he knew a person, the more distance he could maintain between himself and the target while channeling the beneficial effect. If there was one flaw to his Ability, it was that it did not seem to work on Sunny.

As it turned out, shadow essence did not react to Luster's presence at all… which was a big disappointment, considering that Sunny had stripped himself of Serpent's support in order to protect Rain.

'Damnation… why did I even recruit this fool?'

Despite being upset, Sunny had to reluctantly admit that this was not a big issue. Luster's unique and useful Ability would not have had a great effect on him, anyway. The young Awakened was not able to dramatically affect the much more potent essence of a Master, let alone of an abnormal one who possessed four cores.

When Sunny was not training his cohort, he was busy modifying their

Memories. The process was long, arduous, and complicated, but he was steadily making progress.

He had imbued Belle's sword with a potent, but passive sharpening effect of the enchanted straight razor. He had somehow managed to transfer the [Feather of Truth] enchantment of the Mantle of the Underworld to Dorn's sledgehammer.

The latter was an especially incredible achievement, considering that the weave of the onyx armor was one of the most intricate and complicated he had ever seen.

Even more impressive were the six charms that he had presented to the members of the cohort. Each carried an altered version of the single enchantment of the Memory of Ice, which was supposed to raise their resistance to cold.

While the effect was much weaker than that of his personal charm, that was exactly what made this accomplishment so important. It was the first time Sunny succeeded in not only copying an enchantment, but also modifying it.

Although the Memory of Ice was more powerful, it was an Ascended charm that devoured a lot of essence to sustain its effect. The version Sunny imbued into the six weaker charms was more modest, but also much less demanding. His Awakened soldiers were going to be able to keep it active more or less permanently, unless their reserves were completely drained.

…If there was one thing that he had failed to do, it was turning Samara's destructive rifle into a Memory. Sunny had really wanted to, but no matter how hard he tried, the high-tech weapon was just too intricate, complicated, and contained too many moving parts.

There was a limit to what Sunny could achieve. The more complex the structure of the object was, the larger its size and mass, the harder it was to integrate the rudimentary weave into it. Perhaps if he knew more, he would have known how to overcome this limitation. But as things stood, Sunny had to abandon this particular ambition.

'Oh well…'

His dreams of turning the Rhino into a Memory were utterly shattered.

It had already been a week after the departure from the Northern Quadrant. Sunny was currently in his private cabin, sitting on the bed as he stared dejectedly at the heavy rifle. The battleship vibrated subtly around him, but its corridors were enveloped in silence. This far into the night, most members of the First Army were fast asleep.

Sunny himself had not slept in a long while. Of course, as an Ascended, he could easily last a week without sleep… the problem was that it was already his second week.

Or was it third?

With a sigh, he put the heavy rifle aside and threw the unused soul shards into the maw of the Covetous Coffer.

'To hell with it. I need some rest.'

He yawned and put his head on a soft pillow. Suddenly, all the exhaustion of the past weeks descended upon him, making his thoughts slow and sluggish.

A few moments later, Sunny was already asleep.

…And after what felt like a minute, he was rudely awoken by a loud and persistent sound.

Irritated, he turned on his other side and tried to dive back into the rejuvenating darkness.

'Bastards! Quiet down!'

But no matter how hard Sunny tried to continue to sleep, he couldn't.

After a while, he sat up and listened to the noise with a resentful expression on his face. He could clearly hear several voices. By the sound of it, they all belonged to young women.

And these women were…

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Singing? Who the hell sings in the middle of the night?! People are trying to sleep here, damn it!"

Chapter-835: Siren's Song

Sunny sat silently on his bed for a while, irritated by the fact that someone had disturbed his sleep. With singing, no less!

Slowly, however, his expression softened.

'Well… at least they have good voices… yeah…'

The young women sang beautifully. Their voices flowed and resonated with each other, creating harmonies that made him feel tingly. The song was neither sad nor happy — instead, it made Sunny feel a deep, poignant longing. A wistful sigh escaped from his lips.

'Maybe… maybe I should go introduce myself?'

Since these beauties were having a party, surely they wouldn't mind some company?

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then frowned. Slowly, he looked down and studied his shadows, which were silently trembling. His face darkened.

'There is just this one problem…'

How the hell was he able to hear the singing so clearly? His cabin was separated from other neighboring compartments by thick alloy bulkheads. The entrance hatch was securely fastened, isolating him from the rest of the battleship. No sound should have been able to penetrate inside so easily.

Suddenly, an old memory surfaced from the depths of his mind. For some reason, Sunny remembered how the members of the cohort had sealed their eyes with wax before traversing the dark river below the Hollow Mountains.

'Odysseus…'

His frown turned into a deep scowl. Sunny hesitated for a moment, then summoned the Undying Chain. As the lusterless, bleak steel of the slender armor weaved itself from light and encased his body, his thoughts seemed to have turned a little clearer.

The [Chains of Longing] enchantment provided the wearer with a high amount of protection against mind attacks.

However, contrary to his expectation, the beautiful singing was not affected at all. Sunny could still hear it clearly. He still felt moved by the alluring voices.

'Wait… what language are they singing in?'

Strangely, Sunny found himself unable to understand the words of the melodious song.

Even stranger, he had somehow failed to notice that fact earlier.

The words of the unknown language seemed to seep straight into his mind, unobstructed. They echoed and resonated with each other there, making him feel a bit weird. However, their influence was not invasive or harmful. Instead, it was rather… pleasant.

Sunny blinked.

'I'm hearing voices.'

Then, he tilted his head a little.

'...Does hearing voices constitute an auditory hallucination?'

Wasn't there a rule concerning exactly these circumstances in the safety manual? Right… he was supposed to immediately inform the nearest navy officer in case something like that happened.

Sunny sighed, then stood up. No matter how much his heart desired to meet the beautiful singers, there was no way he was going to follow the call of their soothing song.

There was already someone who was aggravatingly adept at tugging on his heartstrings. His heart was all but overcrowded.

Sunny left the cabin and went to find an officer to report his hallucinations to. After a few steps, his foot suddenly made a splash, as if it landed into a shallow puddle. Looking down, Sunny saw a thin layer of clear water covering the floor of the passage ahead of him.

His scowl deepened.

It was still night, so the passageways of the colossal battleship were mostly empty. Of course, activity never ceased on a vessel of this size. The crew slept in shifts to make sure that a complete complement of sailors and specialists always tended to its internal systems and manned the posts.

One such post was right ahead, behind a corner. There was not a soul around, and the thin layer of water made Sunny feel uneasy. After hesitating for a moment, he sent one of his shadows to take a look.

To his relief, the security checkpoint seemed in perfect order. A junior officer in a blue uniform was standing near the wall, studying the panel mounted on it, or maybe simply staring at the wall in boredom.

'Does he not see all that water?'

Or… was the water a hallucination, as well?

Sunny gritted his teeth, then walked forward and approached the security checkpoint.

"Excuse me."

The officer turned around and looked at him without any particular expression.

"Yes?"

The man was seemingly in his early thirties, with pale skin and dark, slicked back hair. There was nothing particularly memorable about him, except for how still his face seemed to be.

Sunny sighed, and then said awkwardly:

"That, uh… the safety manual says to inform the nearest officer if I hear voices. Well, I do. Hear them. So…"

The impassive man suddenly became more lively. A strange gleam appeared in his eyes.

"Oh? What do you hear?"

Sunny rubbed his face.

"...Singing. I hear beautiful singing."

The officer stared at him for a few moments, then nodded.

"I see. In that case, please follow me to the upper deck."

Sunny shifted his weight to take a step forward, but then lingered for a moment and leaned slightly to the side instead. Glancing behind the naval officer, he took a short glance at the man's shadow.

The shadow appeared exactly how it was supposed to appear. It swayed slightly on the surface of the water, staring at Sunny as shadows often did.

Nevertheless, he felt very disturbed, for some reason. His intuition was not exactly ringing an alarm, but it had become strangely alert.

Sunny looked back to the officer.

"Why the upper deck?"

The man smiled.

"Please, follow me to the upper deck."

'Something is… wrong.'

Sunny frowned, trying to understand what was making him uncomfortable. Was it the navy officer's unblinking stare?

Unblinking… yes. The man wearing the uniform of a junior officer

had not blinked once since they started talking.

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, and then took a tentative step back.

"...I'd rather not."

The polite smile slowly disappeared from the officer's pale face. His dark eyes turned a little hollow.

"Oh."

As Sunny backed away under the man's glossy stare, his communicator suddenly vibrated and let out a sharp sound.

The navy officer did not seem to react to it at all.

Sunny, on the other hand, recognized the sound immediately.

'Crap…'

In the next moment, the lights in the passageway blinked in a specific pattern and simultaneously went out, submerging it in utter darkness. The battleship vibrated intensely for a split second, and then went still as its reactors were shut down.

Absolute silence enveloped the mighty vessel.

Condition Black had gone into effect.

Chapter-836: Black Water

As the lights went out and the reactors of the colossal vessel grew quiet, Sunny froze. His Shadow Sense extended outward as he sensed other people doing the same.

Condition Black meant that the fleet was on the cusp of dire danger. After the alert was issued, every member of the First Army aboard the forty ships had to cease all activity. They weren't supposed to make any noises or movements. They were not even allowed to agitate their essence in any way.

The problem was…

The strange navy officer was still mere meters away from Sunny. He, too, stood motionlessly in the darkness. His head was lowered, so Sunny could not see the man's face.

He could only hear his breathing.

It sounded… wet.

"Don't do it. Don't…"

Suddenly, the man's shoulders twitched.

Frozen a few steps away, Sunny gritted his teeth.

'Curse it all.'

The officer swayed slightly, and then took a step forward. The water covering the floor parted, allowing him to move without making any sound. The air grew colder.

A resentful expression appeared on Sunny's face.

Don't move. Don't make noise. Don't circulate essence. Don't summon

Memories.

What was he supposed to do? Break the regulations of Condition Black and risk putting the fleet under threat, or remain still and allow the officer… or whatever it was pretending to be one… approach him?

Sunny could not summon any weapons or use his stronger Aspect Abilities. Simply backing away was against the rules.

'D—damnation…'

The man, meanwhile, took another step. Now, only a couple of meters separated them.

Sunny tensed.

'To hell with this…'

The moment the bastard tried to make a sudden movement, he would learn not to mess with a Master. High alert or not, Sunny was not going to let the creepy thing touch him.

The singing voices suddenly grew louder. He even thought that he started to understand the meaning of some of the words of their beautiful song.

The man took another step toward Sunny… and suddenly disappeared.

For a few moments, he was surrounded by nothing but darkness.

'Where…'

And then, the water quietly splashed right behind him.

'What?!'

His shadows did not see anything!

Before Sunny could turn around, something flew through the passageway and collided with an invisible object behind him,

producing a blinding flash of light. He was thrown off his feet and landed on the wet floor in a roll.

Almost at the same time, the rising voices abruptly disappeared, and the battleship trembled as its reactors came back online. The lamps in the corridor ignited, drowning it in light.

Jumping back to his feet as the Cruel Sight was manifesting itself into reality in his hand, Sunny looked ahead and saw a familiar figure pressing something dark and slithering into the metal bulkhead.

Master Naeve had lost his midnight blue coat somewhere and was now wearing only his black wetsuit. There was a strange bone knife in his hand. Impaled on that knife was a…

Before Sunny could make sense of what the creature looked like, it suddenly lost its shape and turned into a formless mass of black water, which then fell to the floor and formed a puddle.

Naeve's indigo eyes shone with dark light as he turned his head.

"Master Sunless! Are you alright?"

Sunny cautiously nodded.

"What... what the hell was that thing?"

The scion of the great clan Night opened his mouth, but before he could answer, the battleship around them shuddered, and a muffled thunder sounded somewhere in the distance.

The main railgun was firing.

Naeve shook his head.

"No time right now. Check on your cohort!"

With that, the handsome man seemed to disappear.

A moment later, the lamps illuminating the passageway blinked and changed their color to ominous red.

'Condition Red… all-out battle!'

Sunny flinched, and then hurriedly used his communicator to send his soldiers an order to gather near the Rhino.

Before he joined them, however, he hesitated for a moment, and then stepped through the shadows, appearing in a secluded spot of the upper deck.

It took him a moment to comprehend what was going on.

The night was suddenly obliterated by hundreds of bright flashes as hundreds of cannons roared, discharging an endless rain of steel and tungsten rounds into the ocean. A large section of it had changed color at some point, becoming absolutely black.

Although the force of the wind had not increased, the black waves seemed taller and more violent than those rolling far away. They reached toward the ships like fingers of an unknown monster.

In an especially blinding flash, the main cannon of the flagship of the naval convoy fired, causing countless tons of the black water to be displaced and rise high into the sky like a colossal pillar. A second later, the thunderous roar of its discharge reached Sunny and made him grimace.

The scope of the heavy bombardment was truly mind-boggling.

However, it did not seem to do much except for slowing down the churning black water a little.

As Sunny watched, he noticed human figures diving into the waves from the tall decks of the ships. They were the cohorts of Awakened that the House of Night had stationed on the forty ships.

Although the flagship was situated at a considerable distance from where Sunny stood, he still noticed a lonely figure jumping into the ocean from its towering bow. For some reason, that diver in particular demanded attention.

A moment before the figure hit the waves, it shimmered slightly.

Then, something massive and ferocious dove under the water. A giant black fin cut the waves before disappearing into the depths.

The Saint guardian of the convoy had joined the battle.

Sunny stood among the thunderous roars of the firing cannons and stared at the rolling black waves, awed and dismayed.

Slowly, a grim expression appeared on his face.

'There is no place for me in a battle like this. None at all.'

What could an ant like him do when it seemed like the heaven itself went to war against the ocean?

His eyes gleamed in the darkness.

'...Not yet, at least.'

With that thought, he swallowed the bitter feeling of powerlessness and disappeared into the shadows, leaving to join his soldiers.

Tonight, all they could do was stick together and hope to live until the morning.

Chapter-837: Naval Engagement

The vehicle stable of the battleship was quiet and tense. Hundreds of people were moving with somber haste as they secured various tools and pieces of machinery. Thankfully, most of the vehicles were safely fastened in their cradles. As Sunny stepped out of the shadows, he had to make way for a lumbering loader that thundered past, carrying a half-disassembled bulk of a massive engine.

All around them, the colossal vessel was trembling as its cannons continued to fire without stop. Muffled sounds of heavy ordnance sliding into the feeding mechanisms spread through the deck. From time to time, an especially loud noise announced that a powerful torpedo or a salvo of ballistic missiles were launched from their nests.

Sunny was not the only person who felt a grim sense of powerlessness as the titanic battle continued to unfold in this nameless patch of the deep, dark ocean.

While the crews of the battleships and the Awakened serving the House of Night were locked in a furious fight with whatever ancient horror it was that had attacked the convoy, the hundred thousand soldiers of the First Army had nothing to do but wait and beg the dead gods for salvation.

He was better off than most, at least. Sunny had left one of his shadows on the upper deck to observe the battle. Even though it could only see the turbulent surface of the seething water and not the true confrontation that was taking place deep beneath, there was some relief in knowing what was going on.

The rest did not enjoy such a privilege. They could only infer what was happening beyond the metal confines of the vehicle stable by paying attention to the sounds and vibrations spreading through the ship.

Occasionally, a loud and startling bang would roll through the massive compartment, indicating that something had collided against the hull of the vessel from the outside.

Full of dark thoughts, Sunny walked toward the cradle holding the Rhino. Many people threw furtive glances at the passing Master, hoping to find comfort and reassurance in his authority. Noticing that, he made an effort to hide his unease and project an image of absolute confidence.

It seemed to have worked, calming the people down a little.

'Poor fools. What can I do that they can't?'

Reaching the Rhino, Sunny saw four Awakened standing near it with reserved expressions on their faces. Dorn, Quentin, Kim, Luster…

He frowned.

"Where are Belle and Samara?"

Quentin straightened a little when he saw his superior approaching.

"They are in the Dream Realm, Captain. We have already secured their bodies in the sleeping pods inside the Rhino."

Sunny sighed.

Well… it was not outside the expectations. In fact, Sunny had lucked out, considering that only two of his subordinates had happened to be asleep when the battle started.

'At least everyone is alive.'

Sunny had almost expected to find Luster missing. The dolt was exactly the kind of guy to be lured to his death by a vision of young beauties singing sweet songs.

He stared at the young man, who shifted uncomfortably under his gaze, and then turned to the Rhino.

The armored APC was, theoretically, seaworthy. So, it was going to

be their last hope in case the battleship went down.. getting the massive machine out of the vehicle stable was a tall task, of course.

In fact, Sunny doubted that it was possible at all.

He glanced at the sealed blast doors of the giant compartment, then at the solid alloy bulkheads. Would he be able to tear through the hull of the ship, should the need arise?

After thinking for a few moments, Sunny judged that he stood a good chance of breaching the heavy armor of the colossal vessel, provided that he used his most powerful Memories and had enough time. However, there was a big difference between creating an opening that a person could squeeze through and one that a vehicle the size of the Rhino could.

Things would have been different if Nephis was here… with her flames and the shadows resonating with each other and augmenting Sunny, he could have ripped through the thick armor plates with ease. Better yet, Changing Star could have simply melted a giant hole through the side of the battleship.

But she wasn't here. There was also the mass of black water outside. Why was he even entertaining these thoughts?

Sunny sighed and shook his head.

"Get comfortable. This will probably take a while."

His soldiers obeyed, sitting down on crates or leaning against the side of the Rhino. However, none of the four looked particularly at ease.

Luster lingered for a moment, and then asked in a cautious tone:

"Uh… Captain… sorry, but what exactly is going on?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Something big and scary is trying to take a bite out of the convoy, what else? Don't worry too much… House of Night probably has things under control. I personally saw their Saint joining the battle."

Despite the precarious situation, Luster's eyes suddenly gleamed with excitement.

"Really? Wow… I hope I can see a Saint fight, one day!"

Sunny's face turned bleak as he threw a dark glance at the young man.

"Be careful what you wish for, fool. If you are ever close enough to see Saints fight, then something has definitely gone horribly wrong. Believe me… I should know…"

Luster opened his mouth to respond, but at that moment, something collided against the hull of the ship again, making him flinch and lose his train of thought.

Despite the fact that these loud bangs had been occasionally resounding across the vehicle stable for some time now, each was still extremely jarring. People trapped in the vast compartment could not treat them with indifference, no matter how much they might have wished to. Still, slowly but surely, they were growing accustomed to the startling noise of the collisions.

This last one, though…

Sunny scowled.

The last one was different.

He slowly turned around and stared at a certain spot on the opposite wall of the stable.

Was Sunny imagining it… or did the bulkhead look a little deformed?

Before he could finish the thought, something collided against the ship once again, and the alloy wall visibly bent inward.

Chapter-838: Bang

'Crap…'

As hundreds of petrified people watched in fear, one of the sections of the giant compartment's outer wall bent slightly. An ugly deformity appeared on it, and as the echo of the loud and jarring bang died down, they heard the sound of water rushing into the narrow gaps between the different layers of the battleship's armored hull.

A dark expression appeared on Sunny's face. His fingers twitched, and then he turned his head slightly.

"On your feet, soldiers."

Dorn, Quentin, Kim and Luster rose, ready for battle. However, there was a subtle sense of hesitation hiding behind their masks of professionalism and composure.

As elites of the government forces, they knew how to fight against Nightmare Creatures, other Awakened, and horrors of all kinds.

But how were they supposed to fight the ocean?

A moment later, something crashed into the side of the ship with a thunderous bang once again, making the indentation in the bulkhead of the vehicle stable grow more pronounced. People that were closest to it shuddered and backed away. Some turned around and ran.

Soon, the space around the damaged section of the wall became completely empty. Everyone in the large compartment had moved as far away from it as they could, pressing against the opposite wall and staring at the massive deformity. A second passed in utter silence, then another. Then, one more.

All that could be heard was the sound of rushing water.

Someone cursed in a stifled...

BANG!

As several people yelped, the wall bent inward even more, its misshapen portion growing in size and reaching slightly deeper into the vehicle stable. A loud, deep groan of contorting metal rolled through the air, reverberating in their very bones.

"Captain!"

Kim paled as she stared at the deformed bulkhead. Sunny felt her Aspect Ability brushing against his mind, and then his perception of the world changed.

Everything was largely the same, but the damaged wall became tinted by several subdued colors. It was as if a mad painter had vandalized it with an unsteady brush.

Most of the wall remained metal grey, but closer to the massive dent, the armored alloy turned anxious orange and pale red. A small patch of the red was vibrant and vivid, instead.

Sunny gritted his…

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Three consecutive strikes crashed into the outer hull, exacerbating the damage and making the wall bend even more. People screamed and tried to get even further away from it, but there was simply nowhere for them to go. Some eyed the exit from the vehicle stable, while some stared at the contorted bulkhead, frozen still.

Somehow, it still held. The metal groaned once more, but endured.

Nothing happened for a dozen seconds.

Then, another blow crashed into the damaged section of the hull, and the wall bent a little more. As it did, a thin crack appeared right where the alloy had been painted vibrant red.

A single drop of black water seeped through the crack and rolled down.

Hundreds of people watched the drop with horror written on their faces.

…Before the next strike tore the hull open, however, a tide of shadows suddenly rose and rushed toward the deformed wall as a wave. Converging on the damaged section, the wave splattered across its surface and then somehow solidified, turning into an improvised brace.

Sunny grunted, feeling the strain of keeping such a heavy mass of shadows tangible. It was well within his limit, though… if plugging the leak was the only thing he had to do.

The problem was that the crushing blows against the dented bulkhead did not stop coming. One after another, they impacted against it, sending tremors running through the entire vehicle stable.

Sunny had to keep exerting opposite pressure to keep the wall intact. It was as if he was trying to brace a castle gate as a heavy ram was pounding on it from the other side.

Keeping shadows tangible was hard, but forcing them to continuously press forward with that much force was even harder.

Clenching his fists, Sunny looked at his subordinates and said in a strained voice:

"Dorn… help me push the brace against the bulkhead. Quentin, try to use your Aspect to repair the cracks. Luster, keep Dorn and Quentin supplied with essence… transfer your own to them if one or both come close to running out."

Then, he turned to the rest of the humans gathered in the vehicle stable and barked:

"What are you staring at?! Make yourself useful, fools! Those of you who are Awakened with useful Aspects, help if you can! Those of you who are mundane… there are literally tons of equipment and handy machinery in this damned compartment! Even a complete idiot can

find a way to reinforce the hull with all that gear, so get to work!"

The people stared at him for a split second. Then, Dorn and Quentin dashed toward the shadow brace. This prompted the others to start moving, as well.

Another bang rolled through the spacious compartment, but no one paid it any attention. Now that Sunny broke the veil of fear that had paralyzed the members of the First Army, everyone got busy making sure that the bulkheads held.

With the mass of shadows reinforcing the most damaged section, it was not too hard for them to make sure that several smaller dents that soon appeared elsewhere never broke.

The immediate crisis passed. The people in the vehicle stable survived.

Now, all that remained was to wait and see if they would be able to continue staying alive in the coming hours.

...They did.

After what felt like an eternity of intense and terrifying struggle, the battle outside finally started showing signs of slowing down. Sunny, who was slowly growing concerned about his reserves of essence, let out a sigh of relief.

Through his shadow on the upper deck, he could see that the fleet had escaped from the vast blotch of black water that marred the surface of the ocean. The cannons were slowly ceasing their bombardment, and the crews of the battleships had already started evaluating the damage.

A giant shape rose from the depths and broke the surface of the water as it jumped into the air. Sunny saw a glimpse of a creature that resembled a monstrous killer whale, with its black-and-white hide torn and showing many signs of an intense confrontation against an unknown and ferocious enemy.

Then, it shimmered and turned into a tiny silhouette of a human, who then tiredly climbed onto the deck of the flagship and

disappeared.

More human figures emerged from the water and returned aboard the ships of the convoy. Master Naeve was among them.

The handsome man climbed onto the deck not too far away from where Sunny's shadow was hiding and sat down with an exhausted expression. Drops of water were falling from his black hair. His wetsuit appeared more ragged than it had been when they first met, but the scion of the House of Night did not seem to bear any serious wounds.

Soon, his indigo eyes shined as they reflected the first rays of sunshine that broke through the eastern horizon. A new day had come.

The fearsome battle was over.

Chapter-839: Unholy Blood

In the end, none of the forty colossal ships had been lost. Some received moderate damage to their hulls, but the high compartmentalization and the rugged engineering of the war vessels prevented them from going down.

As the fleet escaped the vast blot of black water, it continued moving south without ever slowing down. In fact, the reactors were sent into a controlled overload to enhance the speed of the convoy even further and quickly increase the distance between it and the latent danger.

As the battered ships cut the waves, thousands of crewmates were assigned to repair brigades that started patching up the torn sections of the hulls. None of them paid any attention to the fact that the fleet was still in transit, hinting that this precarious type of work was not new to them.

The rows of cannons were checked and reloaded. New missiles and torpedoes were slotted into the empty nests. The wounded were moved to infirmaries, and the dead were given burials at sea. Despite the frightening scope of the battle, not too many humans had lost their lives.

Things could have been different if the Awakened of the House of Night had not acted so swiftly.

A few days later, Sunny was resting in the officer's lounge of the scarred battleship as he chatted with Master Naeve. Since there were no other Ascended stationed on the vessel, the two sometimes kept each other company.

"...So, anyway, the giant just whacked the creepy skull with his hammer. Boom! Let me tell you, at that moment, I was glad that my pants were already wet. I don't know if that thing died or not, but it

did not bother us after that."

The scion of the great clan looked at him with an amused expression.

"The dark sea of the Forgotten Shore has to be a Great Titan then, at least."

Sunny shrugged.

"That is what I think, as well. But who can say for sure? That whole place is weird."

He hesitated for a moment, and then asked:

"Do you think that it is connected to the black water? What is that thing, anyway?"

Naeve's expression dimmed a little.

"Well… no one really knows. We have stumbled on the Black Water many times, both in the real world and in the Dream Realm. It is one of the more prominent hazards in the Stormsea. Some think that it is a type of Nightmare Creature, some think that it is a powerful Terror that had been torn into numerous pieces, thousands of years ago. Some even think that is the blood of an ancient, long-dead Titan."

He shook his head and sighed.

"In any case, everyone agrees that it is best to avoid it. The Black Water is not really sentient, so hiding from it is not too hard. It's just that this convoy is too damn large. There are too many souls, too many Awakened. Their scent attracted it, as well as all the abominations that dwell within it. Luckily, most of them were not too powerful, this time."

The handsome Master thought for a bit.

"I don't think that the Black Water is the same as the dark sea of the Forgotten Shore, though. They seem similar on the surface, but that sea of yours is much more vast and powerful. It is a miracle that you and your friends managed to seal it, as mere Sleepers."

Sunny glanced at Naeve with a somber expression.

"It was not a miracle. Countless thousands of young men and women had died on the Forgotten Shore across two decades to uncover the secrets that eventually allowed us to seal the Dark Sea. Many of them would have been pillars of humanity by now, if they had survived. We just finished what they had started."

The First Lord and his cohort, the members of the Dream Army… even Gunlaug and his lieutenants. If not for their contributions, Nephis and Sunny would have never been able to lay siege to the Crimson Spire and conquer it.

The scion of the House of Night sighed.

"Most problems can be solved if you throw enough bodies at them. Hopefully, the Antarctica campaign will be different."

It had to be, considering that no amount of bodies would be enough to bury a problem of that magnitude.

Sunny grimaced.

"How long before we reach it, anyway?"

Naeve shifted slightly and smiled.

"Conditions are good. If all goes well, a week at most."

Then, he leaned forward and added:

"Oh, by the way… I just received the news. The government is going to be announcing the voluntary mobilization in the next couple of days. The Second Evacuation Army will already be starting to form by the time you guys make landfall."

Sunny gave him a dubious look.

"That's great. I doubt that it will arrive to reinforce us any time soon, though. Things like that take a lot of time… not to mention that the best and the brightest that the government has to offer are already aboard these ships. With the Legacy clans remaining on the sidelines,

the reinforcements are not going to change much."

The Nightwalker shrugged.

"I wouldn't be so sure that the Legacy clans won't join in the fun."

Sunny frowned.

"I've been told that neither Song nor Valor are interested in participating in the campaign. And while you guys are helping out, the House of Night is not going to send its land troops, either."

Naeve lingered for a moment.

"My clan is most useful at sea. As for the other two — indeed, they have only sent token forces to the First Army. They are acting reluctant… for now."

He shook his head.

"However, don't let their act fool you. The Legacies are definitely going to join the fight. They might not come in the first wave, or even the second… but they will come."

Sunny looked at him, unconvinced.

"What makes you say that?"

The handsome Master simply smiled.

"Have you ever met a Legacy that could resist joining a glorious fight?"

He leaned back and let out a laugh.

"Especially when there are countless treasures, advancements, and spoils of all kinds to be made in the fight…"

Sunny's expression darkened.

Legacies were known to pursue power and opportunity, indeed. If the two remaining great clans did really join the Antarctica campaign, the army would be relieved of a large part of its burden.

However, with what he knew about the conflict between Song and Valor...

Would they be joining the struggle against the Chain of Nightmares to help humanity, or would they be joining it simply because Antarctica could become the most convenient battlefield for their own private war?

Chapter-840: Mobilization

As the naval convoy moved closer and closer to Antarctica, Sunny had to accelerate his attempts to weave new and better enchantments into the Memories of his soldiers.

Although his rudimentary knowledge of sorcery was not nearly enough to create something truly powerful, he did manage to comprehensively upgrade the cohort's arsenal. Even if the modifications he had made were mostly modest, they were all targeted and suited the tasks facing the First Irregular Company.

While Sunny failed to make the Memories considerably stronger, he succeeded in tailoring them to the situation and, more importantly, to their users.

This was already enough.

Now, many of the Memories that his subordinates wielded looked rather peculiar to his eyes. If he were to touch them and peer deep inside, he would see strange weaves that combined the usual strings of ethereal light with the lightless threads made of shadow essence. The sight reminded Sunny of himself and Nephis.

And speaking of Changing Star…

A few days before the fleet reached Antarctica, the world was shaken by an emergency announcement transmitted by the government. Of course, the propaganda machine managed to present the approaching cataclysm in an easily digestible and inspiring light.

It was almost as if the Chain of Nightmares was going to be a glorious stage for heroism, valiance, and human triumph… instead of a bloody, unmitigated disaster.

However, no matter how hard the government tried, people weren't

that easy to fool. Although nothing much changed for the soldiers of the First Evacuation Army, Sunny was sure that a wave of panic was spreading through the rest of the world.

The population centers of the Southern Quadrant were, of course, hit the worst. He could not even imagine what the people living there were going through… but other continents had to be consumed by fear, as well.

If something like that could happen in Antarctica, then it could happen anywhere else. The infrastructure was bound to come under terrible strain when hundreds of millions of refugees from the besieged continent arrived… if they could even be saved. What if the evacuation failed?

How did people living in South America feel, knowing that they would soon be cut off from the rest of humanity?

…No one was left unaffected by the shocking news.

Nephis and the rest of the cohort had to have seen the announcement, as well.

Knowing that the next few weeks were going to be extremely turbulent, Sunny retreated into his cabin, spent some time establishing a new tether, and then closed his eyes.

It took him several minutes of intense concentration to grasp the elusive sensation of the Dream Realm anchor. Then, he circulated his essence in a swift, complicated pattern… and disappeared.

The cabin was suddenly silent and empty. All that remained was a slight, eerie feeling of coldness that permeated the air.

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The Ivory Tower did not change much in the many months since Sunny last visited his current Citadel, at least on the outside.

Well, what did he expect? The great pagoda remained the same for thousands of years, so why would it suddenly change now. The Fire Keepers might have made it their home, but they were hardly

capable of reshaping the ancient structure.

The island itself, however, looked a bit different.

To his surprise, Sunny noticed a large garden surrounded by a neat and tidy wooden fence. Inside, various vegetables were growing in the soil. There were also several other structures here and there, all built of wood. Some seemed like they were meant for training, some resembled simple barns. They all looked rather harmonious.

'That's probably Kaor's and Shakti's handiwork.'

The two members of Cassie's former cohort had used to be Artisans in the Bright Castle. One was an Awakened carpenter, the other Kido's disciple with an Aspect related to plants.

The Ivory Island looked much more… inhabited now.

More than that, a familiar ship rested on the surface of the lake. Despite thousands of years that had passed since its former captain disappeared, the flying vessel remained much the same.

Sunny sighed.

He had been rather taken by the Rhino. But now, looking at the graceful lines of the ancient ship's hull, he couldn't help but feel that the armored APC was rather small and shabby.

'Whatever… it has better plumbing, anyway. That's what really matters!'

Somewhat vindicated, Sunny allowed himself to enjoy the peace and tranquility of the beautiful island for a few moments, and then headed toward the Tower.

As he did, a thundering voice boomed behind him:

"Sunny!"

He slowed down, and then cautiously turned around.

Effie was traversing the green meadow with long strides. Her eyes

were burning with intense emotion.

'Uh-oh.'

A second before the huntress reached him, a swift shadow flew across the grass, and Kai suddenly landed on the ground. The archer seemed concerned.

"Sunny…"

Effie growled, interrupting him:

"What the hell, Sunny?! Antarctica, that was your big secret? You up and left... to go to war? Without telling us?!"

Sunny stared at them for a few moments, and then cleared his throat.

"...Actually, it's Captain Sunless to you, citizens. Please maintain some decorum."

Effie's eye twitched.

Before the huntress did something that one or both of them would regret, Sunny raised his arms.

"Alright, alright! Yeah, I am currently in the Southern Quadrant. It wasn't my secret to tell, okay? The government is very particular about classified information, you know!"

He lingered for a moment, and then added:

"Besides, it's not like you can't join me. The Second Army would be very glad to get its hands on two renowned Masters. The life of service is not for the faint of heart, of course, but the benefits… are to die for…"

The huntress stared at him in stunned silence. Finally, she palmed her face and said:

"Doofus… no, sorry… Captain Doofus, are you really giving us the recruitment speech?"

Sunny looked her up and down and grinned.

"Well, not really. However… I do think that the uniform will suit you very much…"

Chapter-841: Prudent Decision

For a few moments, there was an awkward silence between the three of them. Eventually, Sunny sighed.

"Listen, it is what it is. I have my own reasons to join the campaign in the Southern Quadrant. Both of you are smart enough to realize that the picture painted by the government is far removed from the truth. The truth… the truth is that Antarctica is going to be a disaster, and no one — not even Masters like us — can guarantee their survival. So… you have to decide for yourself."

He looked at Effie and Kai with a heavy expression and added:

"If you decide to join the Second Army, do it for a good reason. Do it for yourself, your desires, your principles… point is, whatever you do, definitely don't do it for me. Chances are that we won't meet even if you ship to Antarctica. It's a big place, you know?"

His friends stared at him with unreadable expressions.

A few moments later, Kai shook his head with a subtle smile.

"Thank you very much for caring, Sunny. But you don't have to remind us, really. We both have good heads on our shoulders. We are more than qualified to make prudent decisions."

Effie nodded.

"Exactly! If anyone should be giving sage advice here, it's us. We're older than you, and also… it's pointless, anyway, because we have already enlisted."

Sunny blinked.

"You what?"

The huntress grinned and patted him on the shoulder.

"What, did you think that we would miss our chance to fight an apocalyptic horde of Nightmare Creatures? Dream on, buddy! Both Kai and I were among the first ones to submit our applications to the recruitment bureau."

He stared at her for a second, then rubbed his temples.

"Wait… you did? Why?"

Effie and Kai glanced at each other and shrugged. The archer was the first one to respond:

"Because there are hundreds of millions of people that need help. Is this not reason enough?"

The huntress shook her head.

"Because I am a warrior. When an enemy invades your home, you don't hide. You go to war and kick the enemy's butt. We humans need to protect what's ours — if we can't even do that much, then we won't be humans for much longer. We'll just be… food."

Sunny studied their faces, then scratched the back of his head.

"Well… alright. I guess that makes sense. Welcome aboard, then! With your power and Abilities, the Second Army is probably salivating over your applications right now. Chances are, you guys are going to outrank me very soon."

'Prudent decisions, huh? Doubtful!'

As they walked toward the Ivory Tower, he shared some details about the operation with them, including the disposition of human forces, the intended phases of the campaign, and his own role as a captain of the First Irregular Company.

As he did, both Effie and Kai grew a little pensive.

"Yeah… I am not sure that the government can actually pull it off. Even if we maintain control over the evacuation centers, repelling the

siege of the Nightmare Creatures for months won't be easy. It would be a miracle if we hold out for a year. But can the fleets even evacuate everyone in a year?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then tentatively nodded.

"That is the plan. The ships… they are massive. The naval convoy I'm currently at is carrying a hundred thousand soldiers, but that is only because most of the space is taken by the war machines, supplies, and all the logistical stuff needed to support a massive army. On its way back, the same convoy can carry millions upon millions of refugees. There are more convoys than that one, too.

So, a year is not an unrealistic goal. Actually, it's more than most projections suggest."

His face grew darker.

"However, that is only if the convoys don't meet obstacles of their own. So, who can say? I doubt that these projections will survive colliding against reality."

Kai sighed.

"It seems that the Second Army won't be ready to deploy any time soon. By the time we arrive in Antarctica, the situation might be entirely out of control. Many things can go wrong in a few months."

Sunny shared the same sentiment.

"For what it's worth, I don't expect the worst to happen before you guys have the chance to experience it personally. The Chain of Nightmares is going to be ramping up as time goes on, as well. So, you'll have plenty of opportunities to live through the truly terrible parts."

They entered the Ivory Tower, where Hope had once been imprisoned. As always, Sunny felt a subtle shiver run through his body and soul when he saw the great hall where he had faced the ineffable daemon.

Now, Hope's former prison cell served as the heart of the human

Citadel. The seven broken chains lay on the ground, forming the wide borders of the circle that served as the Gateway. Myriads of runes glowed softly on their surface.

The Fire Keepers made their home on the upper levels of the great pagoda, so the first level was mostly empty. Only a couple of them were here, busy with chores. Noticing Sunny, they greeted him with excited smiles.

'Weirdos…'

Sunny waved at them, then turned to Effie and Kai.

"By the way… where's Nephis? Has she arrived?"

Getting Changing Star to the Ivory Tower was a complicated process. She had to travel to the Sanctuary of Noctis first, which demanded cooperation from the Saint that had replaced Sky Tide as the person in charge of the Chained Isles. After that, the Fire Keepers had to fly their ship all the way from the Ebony Tower to the surface, pick her up, and return into the depths of the Sky Below.

…However, it had not escaped his notice that the flying ship had somehow ended up on the Ivory Island itself.

Had the Fire Keepers found a way to brave the Crushing?

Kai nodded.

"She reached the Tower a couple of days ago. It didn't take as long as we thought. With Noctis's help, Cassie had studied the flying ship extensively in the Nightmare. I don't know how exactly, but she managed to repair its enchantment circuits enough to move directly between here and the Isles.

The process is a bit precarious, but the travel time between here and the Sanctuary was cut by several weeks."

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then sighed.

"Well, where can I find her?"

Effie gave him a long look and gestured back to the gates that they had walked through.

"She's there, by the lake. Do you want to say hi?"

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Yeah… something like that."

Chapter-842: Lessons of the Past

Leaving the great pagoda, Sunny glanced warily at the bones of Sevirax the Ivory Dragon, whom Kai had slain in the Nightmare, and slowly headed for the lake.

Its surface was calm and clear, as always. Sunlight reflected from the tranquil waters, making it seem like a pool of shimmering silver. Despite the beauty of the heavenly lake, Sunny couldn't help but feel a hint of unease as he approached it. The memory of the furious naval battle was still fresh in his mind, so no body of water felt safe.

On the shore, an intricate bench cut from white stone stood, inviting people to rest and enjoy the idyllic view. Currently, it was occupied by a familiar figure. Nephis sat with her legs crossed, staring at the sparkling water with a distant look. When Sunny's shadow fell on her, she lingered for a moment and then looked up.

"Sunny."

He remained silent for a while, then sat on the bench and studied the beautiful lake, as well.

"How's life treating you? Being adopted into a great clan has to be a weird experience."

Nephis frowned.

"It's… fine. Feels a bit strange to be addressed as sister by Morgan of Valor, I guess. She seems to enjoy my discomfort."

Considering who Morgan's other sibling was, she probably put a different meaning into the word "sister"... one that entirely lacked affection, most likely. For a moment, Sunny was darkly amused.

'Never thought I would pity the Princess of War one day, but having

both Mordret and Nephis as siblings… damn, her luck must be even worse than mine. If that's even possible.'

Changing Star let out a heavy sigh and turned slightly to face him.

"You should have told me, Sunny."

He smiled.

"What, about Antarctica? Oh, that was classified information. I thought that Cassie would have informed you, anyway. She had to have known, right?"

She studied him for a few moments, then shook her head.

"If she did, she kept the knowledge to herself. Cassie… has changed a lot since the Forgotten Shore. She carries a lot of secrets."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

'Huh. I guess there's trouble in paradise.'

"I was under the impression that she's utterly loyal to you… like a lost puppy, you know. It's surprising to hear."

Changing Star did not respond immediately. After a while, she said:

"Cassie has her own thoughts and her own desires. She is powerful, too… no less than the rest of us. Brushing her agency aside would be a mistake."

Sunny laughed.

"Of all the people in the world, I would be the last one to underestimate Cassie, don't you think?"

Nephis simply looked at the lake.

"...Are you safe?"

He lingered for a bit, then shrugged.

"Is anyone safe? I am surrounded by thousands of soldiers,

Awakened, Masters, and even a few Saints. Plus, I'm me. Antarctica is no worse than the Forgotten Shore or the Kingdom of Hope. In fact… if anyone is in danger, it's you. Are you safe?"

Her face grew dark. Nephis gritted her teeth for a moment, and then said with unusual intensity:

"You don't understand, do you? This is not the first expedition of that kind. Humanity has tried to resist the Spell before. The last attempt… the last one took the lives of both my grandfather and my mother. They were powerful, too. They were exceptional and ahead of their time, too.

What makes you think that you'll do better than them?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Many things have changed in the past two decades. Back then, humanity had much less Awakened. There were barely any Masters around. No Saint had even emerged yet… at least officially. Our tech, spelltech, and strategies were much more primitive. We had no experience dealing with something like that.

Yes, North America was a disaster, but we learned our lesson there. This campaign, it will be different. It will be better. I will survive it, and grow stronger as a result."

Nephis looked at him with a challenge.

"Says who?"

He smiled.

"I do. I say if I die or not. It all depends on me, does it not?"

Sunny sighed and glanced at the radiant lake.

"The Nightmare Creatures don't scare me. The Chain of Nightmares doesn't scare me, either. If there's one thing that does, however… it's the great clans and their ambitions. Will they really come to Antarctica to start a war of their own?"

A troubled expression appeared on Changing Star's face. She hesitated before giving him an answer.

"I… don't know. Maybe. It is a perfect opportunity."

His own face grew ugly.

"Why? Why are they doing it now? This is insanity! Our civilization is already on its last leg!"

Nephis lingered for a while, then sighed.

"There has to be a logic to their actions, but what is it? I am not sure. All of it is very strange. We are missing something, I think. A key piece of information that can explain everything. The Sovereigns… they never do anything without a reason."

Sunny scoffed.

"Is there something you are sure of?"

She looked at him and said in a serious tone:

"There is one thing."

Changing Star remained silent for a moment, distant flames dancing in her cold grey eyes.

"When the great clans do come to Antarctica… all of us better be ready."

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Several days later, Sunny ascended to the upper deck of the colossal battleship and walked over to its bow. The guards stationed here and there on the deck let him pass freely, both because of the three stars on the shoulder insignia of his black bodysuit and his close relationship with Naeve of House Night, their direct superior.

Stopping in the shadow of a massive cannon turret, Sunny endured the cold winds that pelted him with drops of icy water and looked ahead.

In front of him were the towering hulls of other metal leviathans of the naval convoy, which cut the waves as they sailed toward a distant horizon.

And out there, on the horizon…

A dark line slowly appeared, finally putting an end to the vast expanse of undulating water.

Antarctica…

After several tumultuous weeks at sea, the fleet had reached its destination.

Chapter-843: Falcon Scott

...Perched precariously on a broken mountain road, the Rhino stood still as the members of the cohort cautiously climbed higher. Belle, Dorn, and Luster were hiding a hundred steps ahead, just below the crest of the tall hill, while Sunny and Kim were currently on the roof of the armored vehicle.

"I see them."

Samara was tensely studying the screen of her military communicator, which was receiving the video feed from a compact spy drone that she had sent ahead. On it was a small valley. The image was grainy and noisy, sometimes breaking out entirely because of the interference of the Nightmare Gate exerted on it.

Flooding the valley, a swarm of Nightmare Creatures could be seen.

"There are hundreds of them. Most are Awakened, but there are several Fallen abominations, as well. The Gate Guardian… has already emerged. It seems to be a Devil."

Sunny nodded.

"Correct. There are two hundred and seventy-four abominations, of them two hundred and forty-two are Awakened, while thirty-two are Fallen. The Guardian is indeed a Fallen Devil."

One of his shadows had snuck much closer to the swarm of Nightmare Creatures. It wasn't suffering from any interference, either. Sunny, however…

Maintaining a calm facade, he shivered inwardly. The Gate was whispering into his ears, calling to him on a level much deeper than thought or emotion. He had experienced the Call before, but now that he was a Master, it became so much stronger and harder to

resist.

Sunny had experienced this change almost instantly after the First Evacuation Army made landfall in Antarctica. While the other three convoys were sent to East Antarctica — the largest and most populated region of the Southern Quadrant — the one he had traveled with was meant to deliver troops to the Antarctic Center.

The Antarctic Center was a long, narrow, mountainous landmass that served as the administrative and industrial center of the continent. As such, it harbored many priority targets that had to be evacuated at all costs.

The first several days after the arrival of the army was pure chaos. The large city they entered, Falcon Scott, was in a state of utter havoc. Millions of people had just learned that their entire lives would be uprooted, or maybe even lost. While the local government forces had done their best to maintain order and prepare the civilians for evacuation, that did not amount to much in the end.

The situation had been only made worse by all the Gates that were opening near and within the city.

As one of the Southern Quadrant Awakened had put it, it used to be that one Gate opened every few weeks. Then, it was one every week. Then, several a week.

Then, one every day.

By the time the Evacuation Army arrived, the situation was swiftly growing even worse.

With so many Gates around, every Awakened, Master, and Saint felt their Call, some more than others.

It wasn't easy for Sunny to adjust to this new, subtly maddening reality. He wouldn't be surprised if the prolonged exposure to the Call drove many people insane.

But they had not reached that point yet, even if the world seemed to have lost its mind.

After spending several days in the panicked chaos consuming Falcon Scott, a large chunk of the army corps stayed behind to start converting it into an impregnable fortress. The northernmost city of the Antarctic Center was going to serve as its largest evacuation center, so it had to be converted into a full-fledged siege capital in the coming months.

Most of the government forces, however, moved out and started their long march south. Their job was to reach other population centers, establish safe evacuation corridors, and start moving civilians through them to the handful of siege capitals.

The First Irregular Company left with the field army and split up to assist its various divisions.

And now, just a day later, Sunny's cohort was going to fight its first battle.

The division they were escorting was already engaged in a low-intensity confrontation against a mass of Nightmare Creatures that had emerged from half-a-dozen Gates at the lower altitudes. To wipe the abominations faster, they needed to flank them, but the most suitable road skirted the mountain slopes and was itself blocked by the seventh Gate.

Deploying soldiers to fight on such rough terrain was problematic, so the Irregulars were sent instead.

Standing on the roof of the Rhino, Sunny sighed.

"We are in luck."

Both Samara and Kim turned and stared at him with inscrutable expressions. After a few moments of dead silence, the latter said in a timid voice:

"I am sorry, sir… but how can facing three hundred Nightmare Creatures and a Fallen Devil b—be called luck?"

He shrugged.

"That is what I call a low-threat Gate. Do you have a guess why?"

Samara frowned.

"Because… there's no Tyrant?"

Sunny nodded with a smile.

"Indeed. Sure, there are a lot of abominations, but without a Tyrant or a Terror to control them, they're just a herd. Things would have been much, much worse if all these creatures could coordinate their attack. Plus, we're smarter. That means that we can stack the odds in our favor."

She lingered for a moment.

"I think the odds are already in our favor. We have higher ground, and the wind is blowing in the right direction. The Nightmare Creatures have not caught our scent yet, which means that the element of surprise is on our side."

Sunny shook his head.

"Don't be fooled. They already know that we're here… abominations have other ways of sensing human flesh and souls. In fact, they would not have stayed put near the Gate unless they were up to something, in the first place. They would have spread around and tried to find something to tear apart and devour."

Kim shivered.

"Then… what are they waiting for?"

He glanced at her with an amused expression.

"Isn't it obvious? They're waiting for us to walk into the trap. That Fallen Devil is much smarter than it looks."

Sunny's expression hardened.

"Which is why it has to die first."

Samara studied the screen of her communicator for a few moments and sighed.

"I can probably make the shot from this distance, but we don't have a direct line of fire. The crest of the hill that hides us from sight also protects the enemy from ranged attacks."

Sunny's smile turned into a dark grin.

"That is true… as far as your rifle goes."

A swarm of scarlet sparks shimmered into existence around his hand, and then, a black bow appeared in it, radiating a feeling of devastating strength. Its string was bright red, and there was a small brand of the same color on one of its limbs, in the shape of an anvil pierced by a straight sword.

"But arrows, unlike bullets, do not have to fly in a straight line…"

Chapter-844: Opening Act

Sunny studied the swarm of abominations that flooded the small valley. These ones didn't seem as dangerous as the primal hunters he had once fought in front of Rain's school. The creatures had bestial bodies, with four bony limbs that ended in sharp claws and long, slithering tails. Ridges of jagged spikes rose from their spines, and their maws were full of sharp fangs.

Most disturbingly, all except for the Fallen ones seemed to have had their eyes violently torn out. Now, only darkness nestled in the empty, gaping holes of their eye sockets. The abominations did not move as if they were blind, though. There was a strange, predatory precision to their subdued motions.

…The Devil was different from the eyeless beasts, though. It resembled them outwardly, but possessed a more humanoid body. The creature stood on its hind legs, while his front limbs resembled human hands. Its eyes were closed, and even seemed sewn shut. Something constantly moved behind the eyelids, giving Sunny the creeps.

The powerful abomination towered above its ilk, reaching almost three meters in height.

Two hundred and seventy-four Nightmare Creatures… was a lot. Most cohorts of Awakened would not have even considered attacking that many abominations, and quietly retreated instead.

'I need to be careful about this.'

Sunny thought for a few long moments, and then spoke:

"Samara, move forward and assume a position higher up the slope, where you'll be able to shoot over the crest of the road. Vanguard, prepare to advance and secure the crest. Kimmy… work your magic."

His words reached the melee fighters of the cohort without any problem. Of course, he could have used the usual technological solutions to ensure good communication… but with how unstable tech was near Nightmare Gates, it was always good to have a backup.

For that reason, Luster was currently in possession of an extremely ordinary, very unassuming rock… which, nevertheless, was somehow able to speak with their captain's voice.

One of Sunny's shadows was following the vanguard, as well, so he had no trouble hearing their responses.

As the cohort's ranged specialist hoisted the heavy rifle on her shoulder and jumped down off the Rhino, the melee vanguard crept forward. Quentin served as the center of the formation, with Belle and Dorn flanking him. Luster stayed behind, to cover their backs and prevent any monsters from escaping toward the Rhino.

He was confidently wielding a beautifully etched halberd in his hands, which both gave him some range and allowed the young man to support the three fighters from the back, should the need arise. Its versatility also gave him a lot of options on how to engage the enemy.

During the past weeks, Sunny had done all he could to raise the battle effectiveness of the cohort and enhance the Memories of his soldiers. The weapons received most of his attention, but he also augmented their armors by transplanting the [Tenacious] enchantment of the Patient Avenger into their weaves. With its help, the survivability of the cohort had reached a new level.

The Patient Avenger itself had been entrusted to Quentin. Sunny also transferred the Blood Blossom to Belle… with much reluctance, of course. With his current strength, the augmentation granted by the morbid charm could not benefit him in any substantial way. It was a different story for the Awakened swordsman, however, so the decision, sadly, made too much sense.

Each member of the cohort was additionally protected by a charm that gave them slight resistance to cold, which is why they were able to all but ignore the slowly falling snow and the chilling wind that

blew through the mountains.

…Standing near Sunny on the roof of the Rhino, Kim — who was wielding a round buckler, a sharp rapier, and had a snub-nosed automatic carbine slung around her back — concentrated and unleashed her ability.

First, she borrowed Sunny's sight. This also allowed her to see what his shadows saw, even though receiving so many different perspectives put an immense strain on her mind. Then, she used her Dormant Ability to concentrate on the Fallen Devil and find its weaknesses. Finally, she shared her own perception back to Sunny, allowing him to see where to strike, as well.

The shadows did not see color, so to him, the body of the towering abomination became painted in different shades of grey. The lighter areas were the most resilient, while those that were darker were less protected.

Strangely enough, a small spot at the very center of the Devil's forehead was almost entirely black.

That was where Sunny aimed.

As he wrapped two shadows around his body and strained his muscles, the black bow bent... despite possessing an enchantment called [Unbending]. Because of it, Morgan's Warbow required a giant's strength to draw, but was also capable of sending arrows very far, and translated devastating force to them.

Luckily, Sunny was incredibly strong, even for a Master.

A ghostly shade appeared on the string of the bow, and then turned into a black arrow with dark fletching and a narrow arrowhead that seemed to have been crafted from a long, sharp piece of obsidian. The shadow arrows were swift, flew without producing any sound, and had an unnatural ability to find cracks in the enemy's armor.

Sunny closed his eyes and moved the bow higher. Aiming at an abomination that was more than a kilometer away and was only seen by his shadow was not an easy task, but he had not trained with Kai

for nothing. He held his breath, and then corrected his aim by a couple millimeters when the wind suddenly picked up.

Lastly, Sunny poured his essence into the bow, instantly emptying one of his four cores. The [Death Dealer] enchantment was a gluttonous one, as far as essence was concerned.

But it was worth it.

A moment later, Sunny relaxed his fingers, allowing the string to slide off them on its own. The black arrow noiselessly disappeared into the sky, so fast that it was hard to see it at all.

It arched above the crest of the road, soared high, and then fell down. The Fallen Devil might have still dodged if it knew what was coming, but the shadow arrow was so swift and silent that the abomination never stood a chance.

A black streak flashed in the air, piercing the center of the Gate Guardian's forehead with stunning ease and exiting from the back of its head a split second later.

The Devil's eyes suddenly opened, revealing…

Sunny never learned what had been hiding behind the creature's eyelids, because a moment after his shadow arrow disappeared into the ground, the creatures' entire skull suddenly deformed and violently exploded. Every bone in its upper body was shattered by the residual force of the impact.

The misshapen, headless corpse was thrown back with so much momentum that it killed several Nightmare Creatures that just happened to stand in the way.

Just like that, the Fallen Devil who guarded the Nightmare Gate was gone.

All members of his cohort froze for a moment, astonished by the ghastly sight.

The Nightmare Creatures seemed to have been stunned by the sudden and gruesome death of their leader, as well.

…Standing on top of the Rhino, Sunny lowered his bow and smiled with vicious glee.

'Not a bad start…'

A second later, the small valley exploded with movements as hundreds of abominations lunged in the direction from which the black arrow had arrived.

Chapter-845: Ranged Specialists

[You have slain a Fallen Devil, Defiled Witness.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have received a Memory…]

A swarm of fearsome Nightmare Creatures flowed up the slope of the small mountain valley, rushing toward the crest of the road, where a handful of Awakened warriors were preparing to make their stand. The eyeless abominations were moving with ferocious determination, covering many meters with each stride as viscous saliva streamed from their terrifying maws.

To their right was the slope of the mountain, while to their left was a canyon that grew deeper and deeper as the road climbed up.

Standing at the top of the hill, Quentin, Belle, Dorn, and Luster studied the approaching avalanche of monsters with grim apprehension. Lowering the enchanted sledgehammer off his shoulder, the striker of the melee vanguard glanced at his comrades and spoke in a reserved tone:

"What do you think?"

Belle readied his sword and smiled.

"This… is going to be fun. If we survive, I won't have to be embarrassed about sleeping through the last one anymore!"

Quentin silently shook his head, while Luster, who stood behind the three, closed his eyes for a moment.

"Crazy bastard…"

The swordsman simply laughed.

At that moment, they heard a subtle electric whine, and then a loud crack of a highly compressed sonic boom. A moment later, the head of a hulking abomination that towered above the rest of the swarm exploded into bloody chunks. The massive carcass toppled over like a marionette that had its strings cut, instantly turning into a lifeless heap of twitching meat.

…Standing on the roof of the Rhino, Sunny drew his bow and let an arrow fly.

"Keep aiming for their foreheads, Samara. Take down as many Fallen as you can before the enemy reaches the two hundred meters mark, then switch to explosive ammunition and concentrate on the front rows of the Awakened abominations. We must break their momentum."

Hidden between large rocks higher up the slope, the deadly sharpshooter recharged her coilgun as she poured a steady flow of essence into an armor-piercing tungsten slug.

"Understood."

A heartbeat later, the rifle whined again, and another abomination fell to the ground. At the same time, a black arrow pierced the head of an especially frightening creature. This time, the effect was not as drastic, but the eyeless horror was killed just the same.

Drawing the unbending warbow once more, Sunny briefly frowned.

'Too slow…'

They had barely two dozen seconds left before the swarm reached the melee vanguard. That was not nearly enough to kill all the remaining Fallen abominations, and then there were the two hundred and forty Awakened ones left, as well.

Sunny and Samara would just have to do their best.

Standing by his side, Kim nervously grasped the grip of her carbine and checked its magazine, which was loaded with bullets that seemed to glow slightly in the dim twilight. Each had been charged by Samara prior to the battle... sadly, the supply of these powerful

rounds was limited. The bullets slowly lost their charge as time went by, so the cohort could not hoard them.

…Black arrows rained from the sky, reaping one life after another. Head after head exploded, turning the cracked asphalt on the mountain road slick with blood. A fearsome Nightmare Creature fell almost every second as the number of the Fallen abominations slowly dwindled.

At some point, Samara shifted her aim to the mass of the rabid eyeless beasts. Her eyes shone with ethereal light as a different kind of bullet escaped from the thick barrel of the Gauss rifle with a thunderous roar.

In the next moment, a powerful explosion tore through the front row of the rushing swarm. A dozen abominations were instantly ripped apart. Chunks of mangled flesh flew into the air in a cloud of bloody haze. Sharp shards of broken bones pelted the surrounding creatures like shrapnel, wounding and maiming them.

Almost instantly after the disfigured corpses fell to the ground, the sound of another thunderous explosion rolled over the mountains, and then another. Two more bloody rifts appeared in the mass of the frenzied abominations. Now that Samara didn't have to aim, her rate of fire increased.

However, so did her consumption of soul essence.

"That's enough. Conserve your essence and switch back to priority targets."

Sunny felled another Fallen creature and drew the black bow again. However, this time, a different arrow appeared on its string.

Instead of wood and metal, it seemed to be made of pure lightning.

Just a couple of seconds before the first Nightmare Creatures reached the crest of the hill, a furious bolt of lightning fell from above. Augmented by the Death Dealer enchantment and two of Sunny's shadows, the Strike of Thunder instantly turned the abomination it hit into a cloud of swiftly dissipating ash.

Then, powerful currents of electricity arced to the nearest beasts, spreading through the swarm in a destructive chain reaction.

Because the monsters were so close to each other, the lightning spread far and wide. It grew weaker with each jump, but still, the damage it dealt was devastating. Sunny failed to count how many abominations he had killed, but it had to be several dozens, at least. Even more were burned and wounded to various degrees.

…But he wasn't done yet.

A moment after the lightning chained through the swarm, the shadows cast by large rocks suddenly surged forward and shot into the air, turning into long, vicious spikes. The Nightmare Creatures that had tried to leave the road and climb higher were either pierced or blocked by them, turning the slope of the mountain into a macabre forest of impaled bodies.

With the deadly spikes blocking the slope and the deep canyon on the other side, the swarm had no other choice than to attack along the narrow line of the road. Funneled that way and with their momentum broken, the abominations that had jumped over the corpses of their slain kin failed to overwhelm the melee vanguard of the cohort in one fell swoop.

As Quentin stepped forward and received the first attack on his shield, the true battle started.

Chapter-846: Melee Vanguard

In early April, Antarctica was enveloped by eternal twilight. The sun seemed to have frozen in place as it plunged behind the horizon, painting a persistent line of vibrant scarlet in the cold purple sky. Stuck between night and day, the Southern Quadrant was slowly slipping into the embrace of pure darkness that would last for many months.

The behavior of the moon was strange and erratic, as well. It remained in the sky for several weeks, then disappeared without a trace for long stretches of time. The radiant tapestry of Aurora Australis sometimes appeared to keep it company. Sunny had heard that the Southern Lights were breathtakingly beautiful, but he was yet to witness them himself.

In any case, he did not care about heavenly miracles right now. All he cared about was whether his soldiers would be able to see the enemy clearly. Even though the long night had not descended yet, it was already hard enough to discern important details in the dim twilight. For that reason, Kim was currently channeling his vision to the rest of the cohort.

The difference it made could be easily seen.

Unencumbered by the absence of bright light and without the need to rely on luminescent Memories, the melee vanguard moved as confidently as they would have in the middle of the day.

Quentin stepped forward and leaned into his shield, meeting the charging abomination without giving any ground. His sword flashed forward, dealing a deep wound to the beast. Already, the edges of the cut started to rot, and the damage was even worse inside, since the blade bit deep.

The combat healer flung the convulsing body of the Nightmare

Creature aside and slashed at another one without any hint of hesitation.

To his right, Dorn brought his heavy sledgehammer down, turning the head of a snarling abomination into bloody pulp. To his left, Belle's sword shimmered through the air, decapitating another.

The road was narrow enough to prevent the swarm from surrounding them, and the slope of the mountain had turned into a killing field because of the bloodthirsty shadow spikes. The enemy could not flank the vanguard, so all the abominations could do was charge forward and up, half-a-dozen at a time.

As the pressure of the mass of Nightmare Creatures mounted, the three fighters turned into an impregnable bastion. Quentin drew most attention and withstood attack after attack, which granted Belle and Dorn a modicum of freedom. They used it well, visiting unabashed slaughter upon the tide of eyeless beasts.

The swordsman danced between them, phasing through his enemies and slicing their bodies apart as if they were made from paper. Dorn fought in a more reserved fashion, but his devastating and inescapable attacks were even more fearsome.

Luster thrust his halberd forward from time to time, finishing off wounded enemies or preventing them from breaking through the walls of steel created by Quentin, Belle, and Dorn.

Streams of foul blood were soon running down the surface of the mountain road.

However… not everything went well for the cohort.

Despite the unshakable will, ferocity, and deadly skill of the melee vanguard, there were just too many Nightmare Creatures for them to fight. Each of the abominations was powerful and deadly, as well. Already, a few heavy hits landed on Quentin's armor, sending a net of thin cracks running through the polished breastplate.

The healer easily managed to restore its integrity, but how long would he be able to keep up this lethal dance?

Belle and Dorn were better off than him, but not by much. For now, one managed to avoid being torn apart due to his elusive Aspect, while the other used his strength and calculating mind to avoid danger.

…Worse still, there were also the Fallen abominations to think about.

Just then, the first of the lumbering monstrosities finally reached the crest of the hill, ruthlessly throwing several of the lesser creatures into the canyon to clear a path for itself. The Fallen lunged forward, opening its maw to bite down on Quentin's shield, and maybe take the healer's entire arm off with it.

Before it could, however, a black arrow silently slid into its throat. The abomination twitched and fell down, sliding forward on the asphalt as a river of blood poured out of its mouth.

Sunny was already drawing his bow again.

Higher up the slope, Samara was calmly sending slug after slug into the attacking swarm.

Kim was standing still, concentrating on providing all six members of the cohort with a clear view of the battlefield, as well as letting them know where to strike to deal as much damage as possible.

'Hell… we might actually make it.'

Sunny had several trump cards saved up in case things went south, but he was reluctant to use them unless necessary. This clash was an important step for the cohort… up until now, they had only trained together. Being christened by blood in an actual battle would not only show how capable his soldiers were, but also truly bring them together.

Sadly… just as he thought that, the situation suddenly and dreadfully changed.

As the whole swarm of the eyeless abominations got close to the crest of the hill, the creatures froze for a split second.

And then, the long jagged spikes growing from their spines suddenly

grew hazy, producing a strange vibration that covered the surrounded area like a dome. Sunny heard a high-pitched ringing that burrowed into his ears like a hot needle, and then, the entire world suddenly spun.

'Curses!'

He swayed, almost falling off the Rhino's roof. Suddenly, Sunny couldn't tell where was up and where was down, where was left and where was right. Everything around him turned blurry, disorienting, and impossible to tell apart.

Through the shadows, he felt Quentin missing a step and being thrown back by a charging abomination. Dorn swung his sledgehammer to cover the falling healer, but missed and was pulled off balance by the inertia of his mighty strike. Belle phased back and staggered, almost tumbling to the ground.

'Sonic attack?'

Sunny gritted his teeth and dove through the shadows, disappearing from sight and emerging between the fighters of the melee vanguard a moment later. A flute carved out of emerald bone appeared in his hands.

Kicking a nearby beast hard enough to crush its ribs and send the revolting creature flying away, Sunny brought the flute to his lips and blew into it softly.

A moment later, a cone of absolute silence enveloped the crest of the hill.

Instantly, the world stopped spinning, and he could see clearly again.

As Quentin, Dorn, and Belle picked themselves up and readied their weapons with a visible relief, Sunny smiled darkly and stared at the approaching monsters.

The Cruel Sight was already weaving itself into existence, surrounded by swirling fog.

Taking a step forward, Sunny gripped the shaft of the somber spear

and grinned.

"Denied!"

Chapter-847: Slaughter

The swarm had lost its leader, the momentum of its charge had been crushed, the secret weapon of the eyeless abominations had been rendered useless, and most importantly of all, scores of them had already lost their lives.

But the Nightmare Creatures still presented a mortal danger to the cohort.

There were still enough of them to bury Sunny and his soldiers under a mountain of flesh, claws, and fangs. More than a dozen Fallen abominations remained, as well, rushing forward to devour the seven humans.

An ugly smile appeared on Sunny's face.

'Come get us, then…'

As the blade of the Cruel Sight shone with incandescent light, he sliced through the body of a lunging beast and issued a quick command:

"Vanguard, follow me!"

He put the shaft of the somber spear in the way of a snarling maw, shifted his weight to throw the enemy to the ground, and struck another abomination with the butt of his weapon.

"Kim, move forward to the crest of the hill. Samara, get closer and keep pressuring the Fallen!"

As he spun and unleashed a diagonal cut, beheading a disoriented monster, a new Memory was already weaving itself into existence.

A thin iron chain was soon wrapped around his neck. On it hung a

small statuette in the form of a beautiful young woman that held a spear in one hand and a human heart in another. Blood was pouring from a gaping wound on her bared chest.

The Dying Wish seemed to come alive as his essence flowed into it.

[Death Wish] Enchantment Description: "Those who witness the wielder of this Memory are compelled; friends to be inspired, foes to seek the wielder out. The power of the Memory grows the more enemies they give the gift of death, and can be consumed to heal the wielder's wounds."

Death Charge: [0/1000]

Now that Sunny was at the front of the cohort's battle formation, both his soldiers and the Nightmare Creatures could see him clearly. Well… he wasn't sure if the eyeless abominations could see anything, but they definitely perceived him in some mysterious way.

The effect of the Transcendent charm could be felt instantly. Behind him, the four fighters of the melee vanguard were suddenly reinvigorated. Their movements grew faster, sharper, and more focused. The enemies, on the other hand, became even more frenzied. They lunged at Sunny like rabid beasts, consumed by blind hatred, hunger, and madness.

With all this fury mostly concentrated on him and him alone, Quentin, Belle, Dorn, and Luster gained some space to breathe.

Which was a good thing, but...

'Crap!'

This was the first time Sunny used this particular Memory, and he was already starting to regret it a little. The pressure of the mad onslaught that the affected Nightmare Creatures unleashed upon him was no joke!

Gritting his teeth, he spun and danced, slaughtering one abomination after another. Guided by him, the vanguard slowly pushed into the swarm, taking a few tentative steps forward. Sunny served as the tip of their formation, turning into a bloody hurricane of radiant silver

and bleak steel.

Despite his superior strength and speed, another fighter would have been quickly overpowered by the sheer mass and ferocity of the countless Nightmare Creatures, then brought down to the ground and either crushed or torn apart. Luckily, Sunny was just too slippery and elusive to be surrounded and piled upon.

As three shadows wrapped themselves around his body, his agility and swiftness reached superhuman heights.

More importantly, when even that wasn't enough, he easily stepped through the shadows to avoid being swarmed by the onslaught of frenzied beasts. Empowered by his incredibly high divine affinity, the Undying Chain effortlessly withstood stray blows that managed to get past his defenses from time to time. The Cruel Sight sang, harvesting life after life like the scythe of the Grim Reaper.

Behind him, the melee vanguard fought with murderous resolve and swiftly improving cohesion. Not only were they able to provide Sunny with much-needed support and block the enemies from attacking him from the back, each also killed one abomination after another.

Belle's sword sliced through bodies as if not meeting any resistance, Dorn's sledgehammer crushed them like a devastating wrecking ball. Quentin's attacks were not as spectacular, but each abomination wounded by him soon stumbled, convulsed, or simply fell down and died.

Even Luster was doing his part, either thrusting his halberd forward like a spear or using its hook to throw the eyeless beasts off balance and make it easier for others to slay them.

Samara had abandoned her sniper nest and moved closer to the crest of the hill to dive into the dome of silence created by Sunny. Her new position was not as advantageous, but she still managed to land most of her shots. Although not all of them were able to hit the weak spot on the forehead of the Fallen abominations, even those that had not dealt the powerful creatures serious wounds.

A few eyeless beasts had managed to slip through the defensive line of the melee vanguard back when the swarm first unleashed its sonic attack. They were already hurtling in her direction with nothing slowing them down.

…As they did, a hail of bullets suddenly struck the abominations from the side, tearing into their bodies. Kim, who was running up the road, aimed her carbine without ever slowing down and unleashed a rain of charged rounds on the Nightmare Creatures barreling down on Samara.

Reaching the last one, she let go of the weapon and allowed it to hang freely from its sling. The young woman sidestepped the lunge of the rabid monstrosity, then delivered a powerful uppercut with her buckler. As its edge connected with the beast's jaw and jerked the eyeless head up, a slender rapier shot forward, piercing the abomination's neck.

A moment later, the beast was dead.

Not too long after that, Kim reached the crest, fell on one knee, and took up her carbine once again. Now that the melee vanguard advanced slightly down the road, she had a clear line of fire at the swarm. Firing it in short bursts, the young woman joined the mayhem.

Suffocating under the constant flood of frenzied monsters, Sunny grinned.

"Dorn, don't try to kill every abomination, just push them off the cliff when you can! The fall is unlikely to kill them, but we can easily clean up the stragglers later. Luster, disengage and help Samara regain some essence. The rest… continue doing what you're doing! Slaughter them all!"

The members of the cohort obliged, echoing his last command with battle cries of their own:

"Slaughter them!"

"Slaughter them all!"

"...Slaughter!"

And so they did.

Chapter-848: Persistent Threat

In the end, the cohort eradicated the swarm of the eyeless Nightmare Creatures. It was not easy, and there were moments when each of them brushed with death. But eventually, the seven humans observed the vast killing field with tired expressions — exhausted, but alive.

Hundreds of cut, crushed, and torn bodies littered the broken asphalt of the mountain road. Blood flowed down the hill, pooling into crimson puddles at its base. The carcasses of the Fallen abominations towered above the corpses of their lesser ilk like mounds of rotten meat.

Looking at the ghastly sight, Sunny felt very happy that the army supplied them with actual food. Right now, he was very reluctant to go back to the familiar diet of only eating monster meat.

With a sigh, he turned away and glanced at his ragged band of soldiers. Despite the fact that their battle was over, time was still of the essence.

"Luster, go inform the Army Command that the road is secured, then bring the Rhino to the crest and park it on the slope. The rest of you, rest while you can. Oh… and also, good work."

The members of the cohort looked at each other, lively smiles appearing on their tired faces.

"We did do alright, didn't we?"

With that, they walked away from the mass of mangled bodies and sprawled on the ground, steam rising from their blood-covered armors into the cold air. Soon, the Rhino arrived, its headlights painting a much more morbid picture of the recent battleground. The soldiers rested and recovered their essence. Since no one was seriously injured, Quentin was in no hurry to tend to the wounded.

No one stood guard, as well, since Sunny's shadows could fulfill that role better than any human.

Everything seemed to be peaceful and safe… however, he was not fooled.

Down in the valley, the ugly rift in the fabric of reality was still pulsing with eerie darkness, silently calling to Sunny. The Gate was still open. Although they had defeated the initial wave of Nightmare Creatures that had emerged from it, more could arrive at any moment.

The first wave was usually the most dangerous, but not always. It ordinarily consisted of the abominations that had been close to the Seed of Nightmare when it bloomed, but as long as the Gate remained open, more monsters could wander through it into the real world.

In fact, Sunny suspected that Nightmare Creatures experienced a Call that was very similar to the one that Awakened felt. It drew them from the reaches of the Dream Realm toward the blooming Seed. Those that had been near it arrived first, but many more could eventually come.

That was why if a Gate could not be closed, it had to be contained and constantly monitored by the government forces… at least near or within the population centers. With time, the number of such containment zones grew, stretching the ability of the government to secure them.

So, the cohort was not entirely safe.

…He stared at the eerie rift for some time, feeling the Call slowly eating away at his sanity. Then, Sunny shook his head, walked over to the Rhino and sat down in its shadow.

He was tired, as well.

It was time to sort out the results of the battle.

Summoning the runes, he thoughtfully studied them.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Ascended.

Class: Devil.

Shadow Cores: [4/7].

Shadow Fragments: [777/4000].

'Curses…'

Despite the scope and ferocity of the recent battle, he had only received thirty or so shadow fragments from it — four for killing the Gate Guardian, the rest for slaying the Fallen abominations. Since Sunny was Ascended now, he gained nothing from slaying Nightmare Creatures of the Dormant and Awakened Ranks.

Becoming a Tyrant… was not going to be easy.

'Whatever.'

He continued to read the runes with a sour expression.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Extraordinary Rock], [Prowling Thorn], [Endless Spring], [Dark Wing], [Moonlight Shard], [Mantle of the Underworld], [Weaver's Mask], [Broken Oath], [Autumn Leaf], [Cruel Sight], [Covetous Coffer], [Undying Chain], [Heavenly Burden], [Memory of Fire], [Memory of Ice], [Strike of Thunder], [Morgan's Warbow], [Shadow Lantern], [Bone Singer], [Shadow Chair], [Overpriced Saddle], [Dying Wish], [Evil Eye]...

Sunny had learned to weave names into the Memories he created after coming back from the Nightmare. [Shadow Chair] was the exquisite wooden chair he had borrowed from Noctis… sadly, no other item Sunny had tried to bring back to the real world survived. Everything had simply ceased to exist once he returned, to his bitter disappointment. However, the artificial Memory remained.

The [Overpriced Saddle] was the stupidly expensive saddle he had commissioned for Nightmare. The [Evil Eye] was the new Memory he had just received for killing the Devil named Defiled Witness. There were also a few Awakened Memories he had gained, but they seemed only good enough to be fed to his Shadows.

'I'll deal with them later.'

He turned his attention back to the runes:

Echoes: —

Shadows: [Marble Saint], [Nightmare], [Soul Serpent].

Attributes: [Fated], [Flame of Divinity], [Master of Shadows], [Blood Weave], [Bone Weave].

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Abilities: [Shadow Control], [Shadow Step], [Shadow Manifestation].

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

Flaw: [Clear Conscience].

Dream Anchor: Tower of Longing.

The name of the Soul Serpent was dim and lifeless. Sunny could not dismiss or summon the Shadow back after gifting it to Rain, at least not from a distance. He still felt a subtle connection to it, though. He knew that Serpent was alive and well.

'That's something, at least. They are both alright.'

With a sigh, Sunny concentrated on his new Memory, the [Evil Eye]. After reading the description, he learned that it was capable of enhancing one's vision, making a person capable of discerning more details, and seeing things clearly from a greater distance. The effect had to be rather powerful since it came from a Fallen Devil, but he

had to decide what to do with it.

Sunny could either use it himself, feed it to one of his Shadows, or give it to one of his soldiers.

Samara and Kim were the best candidates. The Awakened sharpshooter would be able to pick off targets from much further away, which was an obvious benefit. The timid seer, however… Sunny was very curious to find out how the augmentation of the Evil Eye would affect her Ability to see the vulnerabilities of his enemies.

After thinking about it for a bit, he turned his head and said:

"Hey, Kimmy... come here for a second…"

Chapter-849: Pincer Maneuver

The [Evil Eye] seemed to suit Kim's Aspect very well. Of course, the cohort was only going to really learn how much it had been improved during their next battle. Which, without a doubt, would follow very soon.

…But not yet.

Sitting on the ground and watching snowflakes dance in the dim sky, Sunny rested and evaluated the performance of his soldiers — and his own — in the clash against the swarm of eyeless beasts. Overall, he was satisfied with the result. Why wouldn't he be, considering that the enemy had been destroyed while none of his subordinates had suffered a serious injury?

Everyone had performed well. Belle, Dorn, and Quentin had shown their value as elite combat specialists. Samara had confidently surpassed his already high expectations. Kim had been instrumental to their overall effectiveness and provided adequate support. While Luster's contribution had not seemed that spectacular, his presence actually made all the difference.

The young man had also done well enough for himself as a second-line fighter.

However, things weren't that simple.

A subtle frown appeared on Sunny's face.

'How troublesome…'

The relative ease of their victory had been predicated on several factors. Firstly and most importantly, control over the terrain and the proper use of its advantages. Secondly, the immediate elimination of the Fallen commander of the swarm… without the Defiled Witness,

none of the Nightmare Creatures had possessed fearsome unnatural powers.

The vile abilities that Devils and abominations of higher Classes possessed added an element of unpredictability to every battle. It was that instability that made any kind of strategy and planning unreliable. This time, Sunny had been able to remove the threat and maintain tactical superiority, but what about the next? He doubted that every future battle would be as orderly.

Lastly, the cohort had not held back and unleashed its full power to destroy the swarm. Sunny had avoided using his trump cards, but his reserves of essence were now depleted by more than a half. His soldiers were in an even worse situation. It was going to take a couple of days for them to recover… maybe less if Luster was involved.

Sunny did not regret going all out, since it allowed him to create a benchmark of what the cohort was capable of. However, he had a nagging suspicion that they would not be allowed the luxury of carelessly burning through their essence in the future. Who knew when the next combat engagement would come? There was no guarantee that the cohort would receive the time they needed to recharge.

'Conserving essence is going to be a priority… I feel it in my bones.'

His expression darkened. The more his soldiers were constrained in how to express their powers, the more risks they would have to endure.

Turning his head slightly, Sunny threw a calculating glance at Luster. The young man suddenly shivered and looked back.

"Uh… Captain? Why are you staring at me?"

Sunny gave him a reassuring smile, which only made Luster appear more nervous, for some reason.

"Oh, just thinking about the future. But since we are talking… take Kim and go collect us some soul shards. Don't bother with the Fallen

abominations, though. Their hides are too tough, so it would be a waste of time to dress them."

The army would take care of this.

As the officer in charge of the cohort, Sunny was privy to the information about how saturated the soul cores of his subordinates were… not to mention that he could make a rough estimate himself simply by taking a look. Actually, they did not need too many shards. Dorn and Samara had long reached full saturation, while Belle and Quentin were extremely close to it.

Only Luster and Kim lagged behind a bit due to their age.

The cohort was going to reach its full potential sooner rather than later.

As Luster and Kim left — chaperoned by one of his shadows, just in case — Sunny leaned on the hull of the Rhino and closed his eyes.

After spending years in the deadly and unpredictable expanse of the Dream Realm, he knew not to miss the rare and precious opportunities to rest.

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For a while, the small mountain valley was calm and silent. Not too far away, behind the rugged slopes, the bleakness of the twilight sky was being torn apart by orange flashes of heavy artillery fire.

The echoes of thunderous explosions reached the valley from time to time, but the mayhem itself remained somewhere in the distance, where the main body of the army division was engaged in a bloody battle against the small horde of Nightmare Creatures.

Soon, however, a low rumbling drew closer, and subtle vibrations spread through the surface of the broken road.

Opening one eye, Sunny looked down, where a long column of army vehicles was climbing up the slope. At its front, a squad of war platforms marched, their wide metal feet sending cracks through the asphalt with each step. A few of the smaller ones were holding rifles

not unlike the coilgun wielded by Samara.

Of course, in their giant hands, the massive rifles looked small and lightweight, like modest sidearms at most.

The battalion whose path the cohort had been ordered to secure finally arrived. They were going to follow the road and flank the horde of abominations, finishing the pincer maneuver.

This probably meant that Sunny and his soldiers were done with their short respite.

Soon, the towering war platforms reached the crest of the hill where Rhino was parked, lingered there for a moment, and continued down into the valley. The army vehicles and members of the mechanized infantry arrived next, accompanied by a good number of Awakened.

One of them stopped near the spot where the cohort was resting and glanced at the carnage below. His face paled.

The man remained silent for a while, then glanced at Belle, who was relaxing on a boulder nearby.

"You… you guys killed all these abominations by yourself?"

The swordsman simply smiled.

"Sure did."

The Awakened stared at him incredulously.

"But there are hundreds of them!"

Belle blinked a couple of times, then shrugged.

"So? We're Irregulars."

The soldier opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.

Belle, meanwhile, thought for a bit and added:

"Ah, don't be too impressed. Our captain probably killed half of them. We just stayed back and tried to make ourselves useful."

The Awakened soldier was clearly impressed. He looked at the swordsman with begrudging respect, remained silent for a few moments, and asked:

"...Who is your captain?"

Belle suddenly laughed.

"Our captain? He is the Devil! The Devil himself…"

Chapter-850: Surrounded

At that moment, Samara appeared from the hatch of the Rhino and called out to Sunny:

"Captain! We are being hailed on the comms."

He sighed, then opened his eyes and reluctantly stood up. As the Awakened soldier stared at the pale young man with wide eyes, he smiled pleasantly… and then disappeared without a trace, prompting the man to flinch and take a step back.

…Back inside the APC, Sunny emerged from the shadows, walked over to the communication suite and sat down behind a terminal. At the press of a button, Master Jet's face appeared on the screen.

Soul Reaper seemed to be standing in front of a pile of mangled corpses, illuminated by an angry orange glow. Dancing flames reflected in her icy blue eyes, making it seem as if they were glowing.

Set against that backdrop, her smile looked rather sinister.

"Hey, Sunny. I heard that your cohort won its first battle. I guess congratulations are in order?"

He nodded and studied the carcasses of Nightmare Creatures behind her.

"Yeah… you seem to have achieved a victory, as well. What's the situation like with the other divisions?"

The field army had separated into seven divisions after reaching the Antarctic Center… or was it brigades? Sunny was still a bit confused about the hierarchy of army units. In any case, one of them had stayed behind in Falcon Scott, while the other six had deployed south and were currently on the move.

Each consisted of ten to fifteen thousand soldiers and was accompanied by seven hundred Awakened or so.

Master Jet shrugged.

"It's not too bad… yet. The Irregulars are doing their job as well. For now, everything seems to be going according to plan. What about you? How did your cohort perform?"

Sunny sighed.

"Not… bad. We mopped up the opposition easily enough. However, we wasted a lot of essence. If the intensity of the conflict picks up, I'm not sure if I can employ the same strategy again."

She nodded.

"It will definitely pick up, so… good thinking."

At that moment, something thundered from the dynamics, and the image on the screen became noisy for a few moments. Soul Reaper lowered her communicator and looked somewhere to the side with a resentful expression.

She pursed her lips, then said in a neutral tone:

"Anyway, I have to go. Follow the flanking battalion for now and help them deal with the horde that's blocking your division from advancing south. Don't exert yourself and your soldiers, though. Take it easy and conserve your essence."

Sunny smiled.

"Will do."

Master Jet glanced at him briefly and nodded.

"Good luck, Sunny."

He sighed.

"Good luck to you, too."

…However, the signal had already cut, turning the screen black. All that remained was his pale reflection.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then shook his head and headed toward the exit hatch of the Rhino.

Nothing much had changed outside. The sky was still cold, dim, and illuminated by the distant cannonade of human artillery.

In the valley below, the army engineers were setting up autonomous observation posts around the active Gate and laying explosive charges around it. While humanity could not close every Gate, it had learned to diminish their threat in various ways over the years.

Encasing them in cement or burying the rift under tons of soil were just a couple of methods to slow down the emerging Nightmare Creatures at least a little.

Another group of support personnel was already cleaning up the road and harvesting the soul shards. Sunny could have made a point about securing his share of the spoils, but it was too much hassle. The results would be tallied and converted to an appropriate amount of contribution points, anyway.

Plus, Luster and Kim were already back with their trophies.

Stepping out of the APC, Sunny looked at his soldiers.

"Gather up!"

As the cohort assembled around him, he pointed to the glimmering crystals:

"Those with unsaturated cores, share the soul shards among yourself and absorb them. We have ten minutes to get ready to move out. Our next task is to support the assault on the flank of the bunch of abominations making a ruckus on the other side of the mountain. Only Dormant Abilities and passive enchantments this time, so don't get too rowdy. Once the threat is eliminated, we can get some sleep.

Understood?"

There were no questions. Ten minutes later, the Rhino joined the column of the army vehicles and rolled forward, in the direction where the flashes of light and the sounds of explosions were coming from.

The flanking battalion passed the small valley, climbed high up the slope of the mountain, then crested a narrow pass and came in view of a massive battle below.

Around two thousand Nightmare Creatures were pressing down on the defensive line of a well-organized human force. The soldiers were not in a hurry to attack and concentrated on keeping the abominations away from themselves.

The barrage of explosive shells, squall of slugs unleashed by the towering war platforms and countless soldiers of the mechanized infantry, and several hundred Awakened were doing a good job of containing the raging horde.

Looking at the chaotic battlefield from above, Sunny grimaced.

At this distance, the six Nightmare Gates that had disgorged the horde were already whispering into his ears.

'This is going to get old really fast, isn't it?'

The Army Command soon sent them a packet of information, marking down priority targets in the mass of abominations and transferring other important data.

As the battalion formed to start the assault on the flank of the enemy force, Sunny studied it all and then pointed at an especially ugly monstrosity.

"That will be our target. We must take this Gate Guardian down. You guys help me clear the path to the big bastard, then stay back."

Sure, Master Jet had told him to take it easy… but Sunny was not going to miss a chance to earn a few shadow fragments!

His eyes gleamed with bloodlust, making the members of the cohort shift uncomfortably.

Soon, the preparations were done, and the flanking force attacked. At the same time, the main body of the division changed its routine, initiating a charge of their own.

Pressed between the two, the horde of Nightmare Creatures stood no chance.

…Of course, the battalion attacking from the slope of the mountain — and the Irregulars accompanying it — got it much worse than the rest of the human force. Nevertheless, the resistance of the abominations was quickly crushed, and they were ruthlessly eradicated.

Sunny managed to take down another Gate Guardian, as well.

As the exhausted soldiers celebrated the decisive victory, he scowled deeply, and then looked south.

The whispers assaulting his mind were growing stronger and stronger.

A moment later, the ground shook, and the fabric of reality seemed to split open in the distance.

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

'One, two, three…'

As he watched with a weary expression, several new Nightmare Gates suddenly tore a path into the waking world.

Then, even more.

The shocked soldiers rushed to get back into formations while countless abominations were appearing from the rifts, flooding the air with their frenzied howls and shrieks.

…Worse still, one of the Gates opened directly behind the army, putting it into an encirclement.

Standing on top of the corpse of the massive Guardian, Sunny sighed and shook his head dejectedly.

'This… is going to be a long day.'

Well, of course it would be. Since they were in Antarctica, this day was going to last for another few weeks, and then turn into a night that would last for many months.

He had a feeling that this endless night would feel even longer.

Chapter-851: No Holds Barred

Seven new Gates. A flood of Nightmare Creatures. Thousands of tired soldiers who had hoped for a well-deserved reprieve after the long and furious battle, only to have that hope snuffed out in an instant.

Sunny could feel the resolve of humans surrounding him falter… but in the end, they quickly collected themselves. The officers barked orders, the soldiers hurriedly gathered in proper formations, the lumbering mobile war platforms repositioned to open fire on the new threat.

Truth be told, the new development was well within the division's ability to handle. Luckily, none of the Gates showed signs of reaching Category Three, so they did not pose more of a threat than the previous six. The human force had barely suffered any casualties, if any at all, in the recent battle, and they had a theoretical chance of repeating that success.

If there was one problem, though, it was that the division — just like Sunny and his soldiers — had overexerted itself in the previous engagement. Logistical vehicles hastily moved forward to give the fighters an opportunity to reload their empty magazines and recharge their armor suits.

Artillery needed new batches of explosive shells, infantry needed energy cells and ammunition, MWP companies needed to cool down to avoid a forced shutdown...

All that demanded time, which caused humans to blunder the immensely important opening act of the second offensive. Additionally, they had lost the precious terrain advantage and strategic control due to the fact that one of the Gates opened behind them.

…That just meant that the warriors of the Awakened detachment had

to pick up the slack and buy their mundane comrades a chance to regroup and properly enter the battle.

That included Sunny and his soldiers, too.

"Damnation."

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, studying the approaching flood of Nightmare Creatures as his mind went into an overdrive. He had no doubt that hundreds of Awakened accompanying the division would be able to stall and destroy the threat… eventually. However, this time, the human force was not going to achieve victory with minimal losses. Many people were going to die.

Was it time to unleash his trump cards, already?

'This is just day one, for heaven's sake!'

He had come to Antarctica in search of greater strength. Saving the lives of his fellow soldiers sounded very much like something that a man of conviction would do. However… Sunny was not convinced.

Why should he go above and beyond to help these people to even the odds? It was not like they were going to suffer a crushing defeat. Victory was all but guaranteed, with only its cost remaining in doubt. Showing his aces, on the other hand, was a bit risky.

Sunny would have felt more comfortable if he and his cohort were acting alone, but here in the middle of a massive battlefield... the thought left a bad taste in his mouth. He was tempted to bide his time.

...There was a grim feeling slowly rising in his heart, though.

Indeed, it was the very start of a campaign that promised to be long and arduous. If Sunny did not go all out and his division lost a bunch more soldiers as a result, the losses would not be anywhere near substantial, in the grand scheme of things.

However, what would happen if a bunch of soldiers died tomorrow, too, and then the day after that, and the day after that? Pretty soon,

there would be no one left to fight by his side. And that… was a big problem.

Suddenly, a simple and chilling realization struck his mind. Sunny's eyes widened slightly.

The thing he had come to understand was so straightforward that it bordered on obvious:

Antarctica… was not a place where one could hold back. Even though the Chain of Nightmares was far away from reaching its full magnitude, everyone had to exert themselves to the absolute limit already, or face eventual and inevitable destruction.

In fact, even that might not be enough.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

He had known that this cataclysm was going to be a dreadful trial, of course, but now it became starkly clear that even Sunny had underestimated the true scope of the disaster. Theoretical understanding was very different from actual knowledge.

Standing on top of the corpse of a mighty Gate Guardian, he sighed, and then glanced at his soldiers.

"That Gate over there seems to be bringing our old eyeless friends to the real world. Since we already know how to handle them, it will be our next target."

As one of the very few Masters in the division and a captain of the First Irregular Company to boot, Sunny had a larger responsibility than most. It was a given that his cohort would have to lead the charge on one of the seven Gates.

However, he couldn't be in several places at the same time.

The Gate that had opened behind the human formation — the one that posed the most threat and prevented the division from presenting a united front, thus constraining every soldier on the battlefield — was too far away from his position, and so the Irregulars had no hope of reaching it in time.

Someone else would have to handle it.

"Move out! Samara, change position to get a clear line of fire on the designated Gate. Kimmy, stay close to Luster and assist him in covering the vanguard's back. Stay alive... kill them all!"

Without wasting any more time, the cohort rushed forward to meet the onslaught of frenzied abominations. Hundreds of Awakened joined them, creating a buffer between the Nightmare Creatures and the line of mundane soldiers. Buying time for the division to form an effective response.

…A dozen seconds after they left, however, something moved in the shadow of the massive carcass.

Suddenly, a terrifying black steed emerged from it, carrying a fearsome dark rider. The rider observed the battlefield with cold indifference, and then sent her destrier into a gallop. Their eyes burned with infernal red flames.

Nightmare and Saint were heading away from the approaching abominations... toward the hastily assembled battle formation of human soldiers.

Chapter-852: The Return of the Lord

A soldier named Ash was not having a great day. Early into the battle, his powerful exoskeleton armor suit sustained damage to one of its knee joints. Although he could still fight and shoot his rifle, not to mention more than willing to face the abominations despite having his mobility severely reduced, the command judged that the risk was not worth it.

As a result, he had to abandon his fellow infantrymen and retreat to the supply train of the division, where a team of techs tried to repair his suit as fast as possible.

…Sadly, they weren't fast enough.

Who knew that a bunch of new Gates would open, with one of them appearing almost on top of the scarcely defended supply train?

While the techs and other non-combatants desperately tried to retreat closer to the main formation, Ash and a small number of soldiers that happened to be nearby had no choice but to face the advancing Nightmare Creatures alone.

They unleashed a torrent of bullets at the monsters, but there were just too many of them. Even when he emptied his shoulder-mounted launcher to send a hail of miniature rockets into the mass of rabid abominations, the surprisingly potent explosive load his missiles carried failed to make any difference.

He had managed to slaughter a number of Dormant bastards with that salvo, but those of them that were Awakened…

You needed an Awakened to kill another Awakened. All mundane soldiers knew that, more or less.

Slowly, Ash's blood turned cold in his veins.

'Bad, bad, bad…'

An officer's shout reached his ears through the communication system of the armor suit, barely legible because of all the distortion produced by the mass of Gates:

"...tach… bayonets!"

Attach bayonets…

That was the order that every soldier dreaded.

Ash resolutely pressed a button on the side of his rifle. A moment later, a powerful alloy blade slid from underneath its barrel, turning the weapon into an improvised spear.

'Come then, wretches!'

Despite his bravado, Ash felt more and more like he was not going to live to see the next day… or whatever it was that counted as a day in the damned Southern Quadrant. The odds just seemed too slim. The Awakened abominations were bad enough, but he at least had a theoretical chance to take down one or two with the help of his powered armor.

But there were also Fallen ones. Most terrifyingly of all, a creature that resembled a giant, ancient, rotting carcass of a monstrous deer had just emerged from the Gate, sending the other ghastly beasts into a frenzy. It had to be a Devil, at least… or maybe even a Tyrant.

Ash shuddered and readied himself.

'Well… so be it. We need to give the supply guys time to run. These bastards are going to learn what humans are capable of! Hell, who knows! Maybe reinforcements will arrive in time!'

In the next moment, the Nightmare Creatures closed in on the thin line of soldiers, making ranged fire useless. Ash caught a lunging Dormant beast on the tip of his bayonet and grunted, feeling his powered armor suit being pushed back.

'Strong…'

The mini-boosters on the back of the heavy exoskeleton ignited, pushing him forward. Ash sliced through the flesh of the revolting creature, then tried to land a blow on another snarling abomination.

Sadly, at that moment, the damaged joint of his armor finally gave out, throwing him off balance. The bayonet slid off the hide of the Awakened monster without leaving even a scratch on it.

Ash helplessly toppled to the ground. Before he could move, sharp fangs closed on his shoulder, easily crushing the tempered alloy of his armor and the complicated internals of the powered suit. A terrible pain tore through his side.

'D—die… I am going to die!'

He looked up and stared at the ugly snout of the monster that was going to kill him, his eyes wide.

…And then, the monster's head exploded into bloody chunks.

Ash blinked as a visage out of a nightmare flashed past him. It was a black horse carrying a human rider that wore an intricate onyx armor… at least, the rider looked like a human.

Or a demon, perhaps.

It was the black steed's hoof that had crushed the Nightmare Creature's head. Without ever slowing down, the demonic knight continued forward, killing numerous abominations in passing. Suddenly, the pressure on the mundane soldiers reduced.

The dark rider and his… her?... nightmarish steed flew through the mass of rabid creatures, slaughtering one after another.

'The sword…'

The knight wielded a strange weapon. The sword he… she?... held was made out of black stone, and broken. Its edge, however, was still sharp.

As Ash struggled to stand up, the demonic knight tore through the onslaught of Nightmare Creatures, getting closer and closer to the monstrous deer. At some point, the rider gracefully jumped off the black steed's back, soaring high into the air and landing right in front of the charging Guardian.

Ash didn't see what happened next, because the figure of the infernal knight became hidden behind the mass of Nightmare Creatures. All he perceived was a chilling, absolutely inhuman shriek that suddenly rolled across the battlefield, so loud that the auditory systems of his exosuit failed to filter the deafening wail out.

'Gods…'

Finally, he managed to raise himself from the ground. The battle was still not over… in fact, it was only starting. Even though Ash would have to struggle to do anything with only one functioning leg and a torn shoulder that reduced the range of motion of his right arm, he was determined to do his part.

Raising his rifle once again, he glanced forward and saw the dreadful black horse rampaging among the Nightmare Creatures. There was no sign of its demonic rider, but judging by the erratic movements of the giant deer-like monstrosity, the onyx knight was fighting it.

'Who is crazy enough to attack that horror alone?!'

But the mysterious warrior did not just attack the terrifying Gate Guardian ...

Ash froze for a moment.

'Wait… did he… no, she… did that demon actually?'

The rotting body of the ghastly deer suddenly swayed… and then toppled. Another shriek pierced Ash's ears, and then, the mass of Nightmare Creatures seemed to lose most of its coordination.

The Gate Guardian was dead.

Ash couldn't believe his luck.

And, as if fortune truly smiled on him today, not too long after the fearsome abomination fell, reinforcements arrived from behind, forging an impregnable defense line to stop the enemy's advance.

Ash fired the last of his bullets, then stumbled away and retreated. This time, he was sent to the field hospital instead of a repair vehicle, to have his body tended to instead of his powered suit.

There, wincing as his torn shoulder was hastily mended together, Ash frowned.

'Wait… that armor… that demonic aura… the cold indifference and dark charisma…'

His eyes suddenly widened.

The battle still raged on, but Ash was utterly preoccupied by something else.

'Was I saved… by Mongrel?!'

Chapter-853: Bone Singer

This time, Sunny chose to dive into the melee from the very first moment of the battle. His bow was a fearsome tool to slay powerful targets from a distance, but now that the situation had come to a full-fledged frontal assault, restraining the horde of lesser Nightmare Creatures was more important.

After all, they were only less than when compared to utterly terrifying abominations. Each was still a deadly threat. Plus, using the [Death Dealer] enchantment again was out of question.

Not to mention that the value of the Dying Wish was vastly increased, considering that he was leading a good hundred of Awakened instead of a single cohort right now. Any ally who could see Sunny clash with the monsters would feel inspired to fight with renewed zeal and resolve.

…On the other hand, he was also facing an entire horde of Nightmare Creatures instead of a single swarm. That meant that the Dying Wish would make him the target of hundreds of frenzied abominations.

Its power had also increased due to the fact that he had already killed dozens of enemies affected by the [Death Wish] enchantment in the previous two battles.

'Oh well…'

He would just have to manage, somehow.

Sunny had already decided to go all out, but now, for the first time in a long time, he suddenly felt a dire lack of powerful tools at his disposal. He had always prided himself on how formidable and versatile his arsenal of Memories was… but it seemed to have fallen behind the kinds of threats Sunny was facing these days.

He didn't even have anything to arm Saint with! To his shame, her broken stone sword was deadlier than any melee weapon he possessed, except for the Cruel Sight. As a part of an Ascended Demon, the stone blade carried the power of an Ascended weapon, as well. Sadly, unlike taciturn Shadow herself, the sword had not shown any sign of being able to repair itself... yet.

Sunny was clad in the Undying Chain, wielded the Cruel Sight, and harnessed the power of the Dying Wish. He was also augmented by two of his shadows. Saint only had the Broken Oath, which she could not use recklessly while riding Nightmare. The black courser and his rider were empowered by one shadow each.

Other than that, there was not much Sunny could employ to change the odds in his favor.

'Damn it, I really need more Memories!'

What of the tools he did have, though?

"Kimmy, what do you see?"

His soldiers were his tools, too. Considering that the last powerful Memory Sunny had found went to Kim, he hoped to get some results.

There were just a dozen seconds left before they clashed with the enemy. The young woman lingered for a moment, and then said something that ignited a small flame in Sunny's heart.

"I… I see! These beasts are vulnerable to sonic attacks!"

'That!'

Sunny had formed a similar suspicion after facing the eyeless abominations for the first time, but unsubstantiated suspicions were not something a good strategy could be built upon. Now, however…

'I bet it's their perception. Has to be.'

He summoned the flute carved out of a strange emerald femur... the Bone Singer. This Ascended Memory of the third Tier, which he had gained in the Red Colosseum, possessed three enchantments —

[Sonorous], [Silenced], and [Sepulcher Song].

The first one allowed the flute to sing at various volumes. This was the enchantment Sunny had copied to the Silver Bell and the Ordinary Rock. The second allowed the flute to create a dome of silence around itself. The third one… Sunny had not been able to use it yet.

It was supposed to raise the dead.

However, one had to know how to actually play the flute to activate it, which Sunny did not. Additionally, the risen corpses would be murderous, wicked, and uncontrolled. The only way to command them and prevent them from attacking the summoner was to soothe them with a correct melody… which he had no way of knowing, as well.

In any case, Sunny was only interested in the [Sonorous] enchantment right now.

Commanding the flute to sing as loud as it could, he saturated it with his essence and then threw the bone instrument to Luster.

"Play it!"

The young man caught the emerald flute and stared at it with a startled expression.

"But, Captain… I have no idea how to!"

Sunny was already turning back to the tide of abominations.

"Just blow into the hole, damn it!"

Luster hesitated for half a second, then obediently brought the Bone Singer to his lips.

A moment later, a deafening, discordant, ear-piercing whistle exploded from the flute, spreading far and wide.

And just a moment before the flood of eyeless abominations crashed against the Awakened… they suddenly stumbled and lost their

momentum, as if severely disoriented.

Sunny grinned as the Cruel Sight reaped the life of his first victim.

The Bone Singer had not produced a sonic attack, per se. It was just terribly loud and hideously shrill. However, just like he had thought, that turned out to be enough. The beasts were blind, after all… they had to perceive the world through some other means, and their hearing had turned out to be the dominant one of those.

If Sunny had to guess, he would have said that the long spikes on their backs were meant to sense sound waves spreading through the air, which the abominations were then able to interpret into a coherent picture of their surroundings.

Subjecting them to the terrible song of the Bone Singer was akin to using a flashbang grenade.

Without ever slowing down, Sunny cut into the horde of Nightmare Creatures. Driven into a murderous frenzy by the Dying Wish, hundreds of them rushed forward to tear him apart… only to die by his blade.

Sunny had fully unleashed his powers.

Dancing between the abominations like a dark deity, he slaughtered them without stop. Now that Sunny did not have to control the shape of the battlefield, he used Shadow Manifestation to enhance his own might. Dark tentacles rose from the ground to ensnare and rip his enemies apart.

From time to time, two additional limbs appeared on his body, piercing the abominations or slicing their bodies with adamantine claws.

The Cruel Sight shrieked like a banshee every time it cut the air… over the years, Sunny had been subjected to all kinds of attacks and tortures. The [Dark Mirror] enchantment of the somber spear had long accumulated a vast library of elemental damage types. He had just never had a reason to use any except for divine flame and soul attacks.

Things were different now.

…Soon, piles of corpses and rivers of blood surrounded him. The more abominations attacked him, the more he was able to kill.

The sight of the slaughter was both terrifying and eerily beautiful.

The Awakened detachment of the human division faced the onslaught of the Nightmare Creatures, shuddered, but managed to hold the horde off for a few precious minutes.

Then, the mundane soldiers of the First Evacuation Army joined the fray. Supported by the destructive might of their high-tech armaments, the Awakened changed their tactic and went on the offensive.

Sunny led one of the charges. With his cohorts serving as the tip of the spear, almost a hundred warriors cut deep into the horde and moved to where the Gate Guardian was hiding.

It was another Fallen Devil, similar to the one Sunny had killed a few hours before. This one, however, seemed slightly smaller, and yet more powerful.

It was a female.

"Stay back!"

As the distance to the dreadful abomination grew shorter, Sunny commanded his soldiers to keep away and dove through the shadows, appearing near the Gate Guardian.

Once again, the creature's eyelids trembled, as if about to open. Somehow, he knew that he would be in terrible danger if he ever looked into those eyes.

Trusting his intuition, Sunny closed his own and dashed forward while relying entirely on shadow sense. A small lantern hanging from his belt suddenly came to life, and a flood of darkness shrouded everything around.

In the embrace of shadows, Sunny suddenly felt a mortifying chill

assault his senses…

The Defiled Witness was looking at him.

A moment later, a bright flash tore the darkness apart. Imbued with divine flame, the blade of the Cruel Sight drew a line across the abomination's neck, beheading it. As the decapitated corpse fell to its knees, the bestial head flew away, enveloped in white flames.

...Not long after that, the battle was finally over.

Chapter-854: Perfect Alibi

'What a day…'

Sunny tiredly dragged his body back to the Rhino, wincing in disgust at all the bodies littering the ground. Why did Nightmare Creatures have to be so ugly?

'Why, do you prefer to be surrounded by pretty corpses? That would probably be even worse.'

War was ugly, and maybe… just maybe… it was actually a redeeming quality.

His soldiers followed him, just as exhausted. No one was seriously wounded, which was the best result Sunny could have hoped for. However, they were in no mood to speak.

Other fighters of the First Army, however, felt differently.

A buzz of voices surrounded them. The division was in the process of regrouping after the unexpectedly strenuous confrontation with not one, but two entire hordes of abominations. The logistics of the whole process were pure hell, which was only made worse by the strong interference produced by the Gates.

The Gates… in the immediate area around the human force, separated merely by a few kilometers each, there were now fourteen of them. Seven had opened at some point in the past, and seven more opened simultaneously just a few hours ago.

The idea of something like that happening would have seemed preposterous before, but with the Chain of Nightmares descending upon the Southern Quadrant, nothing was impossible anymore.

Sunny shook his head. At least he collected plenty of fragments

today, as well as earning himself some reputation. Anyone who had seen him fight had to be impressed.

And why wouldn't they be? Sunny had personally slain three Gate Guardians today.

There was one problem, though…

As he walked through the battlefield, he couldn't help but overhear bits and pieces of various conversations.

"Damn… these Irregulars are no joke. Have you seen their captain? The man is a demon! I heard… no, I saw him tear the head off a Fallen Devil's body with his bare hands!"

"Wait, really? Although, now that I look at him... it's easy to believe. That giant guy with a sledgehammer, right?"

"No, you idiot. The pale kid… you know, the one who looks like a haunted vintage doll…"

"Man, who cares about some captain?! Haven't you heard?!"

"...Heard what?"

"That Gate behind us, do you know who cleared it? It was Mongrel! Lord Mongrel himself!"

"No way! He's in Antarctica?!"

Sunny blinked.

'...What?'

The more he listened to what the soldiers were talking about, the more he heard the damned nickname.

Mongrel, Mongrel, Mongrel…

'Are they all insane?!'

Sure, Saint's armor looked somewhat similar to the Mantle of the Underworld, but everything else was different! Firstly, and most

importantly, she was clearly a woman while he was obviously a man. Secondly, his Shadow wore her closed helmet instead of Weaver's Mask!

Who could mistake one for another?

After thinking about it for a bit, however, Sunny came to a disturbing conclusion.

He knew what Weaver's Mask could do and why he wore it. People, however, did not. To them, the fearsome mask was just another Memory, so it was perfectly natural that Mongrel would don a helmet instead of it before going into battle.

Additionally, he doubted that anyone had gotten a good look at Saint. She was moving incredibly fast while galloping to the rear of the human formation, and then dove into a mass of Nightmare Creatures without ever slowing down.

Whatever recording remained had to be of terrible quality, considering the disrupting effect of the Gates.

And speaking of recordings…

As soon as they reached the Rhino, Sunny connected his communicator to the vehicle's powerful communications suite and accessed the network.

Almost immediately, the sensational titles of several recent articles attracted his attention:

"A Humble Hero! After eschewing the allure of fame and avoiding the limelight for almost two years, renowned swordsman Mongrel appears in Antarctica to save fifteen thousand soldiers from certain doom!"

"Guardian Angel of Humanity: true to his word, Lord Mongrel, who once proclaimed that he was just a human, courageously puts his life at risk to protect the human race!"

"Exclusive footage of Lord Mongrel vanquishing a Fallen Tyrant!"

"Lord Mongrel confirmed to be… a lady!"

Sunny silently covered his face with a hand.

'Gods… that was fast.'

The government propaganda machine must have decided that Lord Mongrel, whoever he might be, was a good tool to prop up the current recruitment efforts. A somewhat hot celebrity appearing on the battlefield was a good tool to inspire more people to enlist.

His face turned a little bitter.

'I killed three whole Gate Guardians, dammit! Three! Saint only killed one, and even then, it was with the help of Nightmare. Why is no one speaking about me?'

Even the soldiers of his division seemed to have completely forgotten about Sunny's contributions once the news of Mongrel appearing during the battle spread.

Not that Sunny wanted to be recognized for anything… in fact, he vastly preferred being a complete unknown.

But still!

With a sigh, he looked up the recordings uploaded to the network. Just as he had expected, the quality was terrible. Saint looked like a blurry black silhouette with no definable features. What little the government allowed to be shown did not paint a clear picture of her clash against the Nightmare Creatures. It just looked like a mess of movement accompanied by a litany of bestial howls.

However, that only added fuel to the collective imagination of people who had watched the video! He read a few of the discussions and closed his eyes for a moment, holding back a groan.

'What is this crap?'

From what people were saying, it seemed as if Mongrel single-handedly eradicated several thousands of Nightmare Creatures while actual soldiers helplessly stood back and applauded.

Suddenly, Sunny let out a small laugh.

Before unleashing Saint, he had been worried that people would connect the dots and realize that he was Mongrel…

Reality, however, turned out to be the exact opposite. Thousands of humans had witnessed him fight at the front of the formation, while at the same time, thousands more had seen someone who they mistakenly assumed to be Mongrel fight at the back.

The two couldn't possibly be the same!

The action that could have potentially revealed his secret… had become a perfect alibi instead.

Sunny sighed, and then shook his head in bewilderment.

'Well… that's something, I guess…'

Chapter-855: Snow and Ash

There were a lot of things to do before the division resumed its march. Soul shards had to be extracted from the carcasses of the Nightmare Creatures, the carcasses themselves had to be piled into mounds to clear the way for the vehicles.

Usually, each would have been dressed to harvest useful materials — the hides and bones of the abominations were a precious resource, especially that of the Fallen ones.

However, no one had time to properly process the remains of the fearsome horde, so the corpses were simply discarded by the side of the road, doused in incendiary liquid, and burned.

The transports and artillery vehicles, damaged war platforms, and powered suits of mechanized infantry had to be checked and repaired. Spent ammunition had to be replaced, wounded had to be healed. Soldiers, both mundane and Awakened, needed time to rest and recover.

Aboard the Rhino, members of the cohort slept in shifts. Three entered the Dream Realm while the other three remained on guard. As soon as the first shift returned, the second shift took their place inside the sleeping pod. Sunny remained awake, meditating silently at the back of the vehicle.

…In the morning, the division had to perform one final task.

In a solemn silence, the bodies of the fallen soldiers — about a hundred or so — were covered by pristine white flags. The general in command of the division gave a short speech, and then lowered his head. After that, several war platforms towering above him activated powerful flamethrowers attached to their mechanical arms, unleashing long streams of furious fire to consume the bodies.

In the harsh conditions of the Antarctic campaign, the First Army could not give its fallen a better burial. Even if the division could spare time to dig graves in the frozen soil, the risk of a stray Nightmare Creature disturbing them in the future was too high.

And with so many living people waiting for their turn to board the evacuation ships, sacrificing precious space to send the bodies back home was a luxury that no one could afford.

Looking at the funeral pyre in silence, Sunny couldn't help but fall into a somber mood. Although the ritual itself was beautiful and dignified, in truth, the soldiers who had sacrificed their lives were treated not much different from the Nightmare Creatures that had killed them. In the end, both were consumed by flames.

For some reason, the image of countless candles burning in front of the Academy gates appeared in his mind. With a sigh, Sunny turned away and spoke to his subordinates:

"Let's go."

At least the losses weren't too terrible. If Saint had not struck down the Guardian of the northernmost Gate so swiftly, things could have been much worse.

Soon, the division moved forward. All that was left behind was a landscape decimated by the battle, with snow and ash mixing as they swirled in the air.

Sunny remained at the back of the Rhino with a contemplative expression on his face. Soon, however, he was distracted from his thoughts by an incoming communication.

Master Jet's alabaster face appeared on the screen.

"Sunny. I have a new mission for you…"

***

The field army dispatched to the Antarctic Center had a straightforward objective — turn a small number of cities into impregnable strongholds, relocate all human population of the region

to these strongholds, and then entrench themselves for as long as it was going to take to evacuate everyone.

At some point, reinforcements were supposed to arrive and make the task of withstanding the siege of Nightmare Creatures easier.

Before that happened, however, the First Army had to complete the most perilous stage of the operation alone. Siege capitals had to be built, evacuation corridors had to be established, and millions of people had to be moved through them in a timely fashion. All of that demanded the human forces to be split into numerous smaller detachments, which posed a significant risk.

Additionally, there were too many moving parts to this plan, and each of them could fail and end in disaster.

Right now, the division Sunny was assigned to was swiftly moving toward a large city that was going to become an entrenched stronghold. In the process, they were also laying the groundwork to establish transportation connections to smaller settlements, either by bolstering the existing civilian infrastructure or creating their own.

After yesterday's battle, there seemed to be no serious obstacles in the division's path. Some of the other divisions, however, were not faring that well.

Soul Reaper seemed a bit tired as she spoke from the screen:

"...a bit of a problem. There is a Category Three Gate blocking their way, guarded by a powerful Corrupted creature. From the initial observation, it is at least a Devil… however, it could also be a Tyrant. Winter can't handle it alone. You and I are the closest, so… buckle up. Separate from your division and move south-east at full speed until you reach the rendezvous point.

It's about seventy kilometers away from your current position."

Sunny briefly studied the map, then said hesitantly:

"A Corrupted Tyrant… are you sure that the three of us can manage killing it?"

All Corrupted abominations were frightening, but a Tyrant… the thought of facing one in battle made Sunny feel ill at ease. He had only ever fought one creature of that Rank, the Wormvine. Even then, he had only killed the vile Monster by slaying its host with the Aidre's wooden knife.

Of course, Sunny had been a mere Awakened back then. He was much more powerful now. But… what truly disturbed him was the lack of information. Fighting an enemy after studying it for a while was completely different from going in blind. He probably had a slim chance against a Corrupted Tyrant if there was ample time to prepare. As it stood, though…

Master Jet did not seem to share his concerns. She grinned darkly, and then shook her head:

"The three of us is enough. However, this time, we won't be fighting alone. Someone else will be joining the fun."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Who?"

Soul Reaper leaned forward a little.

"A Saint…"

Chapter-856: Alien Landscape

The First Evacuation Army was accompanied by three Saints. One was loyal to the government, while the other two… the other two had been sent by the great clans.

Unofficially, Valor and Song had refused to participate in the Southern Quadrant campaign. Officially, however, they still had to keep up appearances. For that reason, each had provided a token force to support the evacuation effort, and the two Saints in question were in charge of these forces.

Sunny did not know who these Transcendents were. All he knew was that the government had wisely chosen to separate them, sending one to East Antarctica, while the other ended up in the Antarctic Center.

And now, apparently, that latter was coming to aid the Irregulars in vanquishing a powerful Corrupted abomination. He was not sure how to feel about that.

On one hand, the help of a Saint was more than welcomed. On the other hand… one of the reasons he had decided to participate in the Antarctica campaign was to get away from the great clans and their machinations.

Now, it seemed that he just couldn't escape coming in contact with the Sovereigns and their forces.

'Curse it all…'

With a sigh, Sunny sent Luster the coordinates of the rendezvous point and walked over to the pilot's cabin.

"We have new orders. Get to this location as fast as possible."

The young man yawned, studied the coordinates for a bit, and then

nodded.

"Aye, sir."

He lingered for a moment.

"Uh… by the way, what's there?"

Sunny shrugged with a nonchalant expression.

"A Corrupted Tyrant? Something like that."

Luster paled, stared at him with wide eyes, and suddenly grew very quiet.

Rhino left the marching formation of the division and accelerated forward, quickly overtaking slower vehicles. Then, it made a sharp turn, left the wide highway entirely, and entered uneven terrain. Its massive wheels easily rolled through mud and rocks.

Thanks to the high-tech suspension system, the members of the cohort barely felt any disturbance.

In the next several hours, the armored vehicle briskly traversed the wild expanse of the Antarctic Center. Powerful spotlights installed on the Rhino's roof flooded the landscape in front of it with stark light, cutting the dimness with wide beams. Various sensors supplied Luster with additional information to better steer the heavy carrier.

The Antarctic Center… was very different from the wilderness of Asia that Sunny had seen during his brief train ride. It was just as lifeless, but in a different manner. There were fewer signs of past wars and disasters here, but at the same time, the land somehow seemed even more desolate.

It was much more uneven and mountainous, too. Basically, most of the landmass was covered by a vast mountain chain. Because of that, the horizon was obscured most of the time, and it was hard to notice any approaching threats. More than that, the landscape itself looked strange and alien.

Well, no surprise. After all, Antarctica had been covered by ice for

millions of years, and only recently shrugged off its heavy veil. The passing of monumental glaciers had left many strange things behind.

The Rhino was doing an amazing job of navigating the complicated terrain. It moved toward the rendezvous point with sufficient speed, sometimes making use of existing roads, sometimes cutting through untouched wilderness. It climbed or descended tall hills and mountain outcroppings, traversed stretches of frozen marshlands, and waded through labyrinths of giant boulders with equal ease.

If there was one thing that kept Sunny tense, it was that he rarely had an opportunity to see far ahead. These days, the Southern Quadrant was not as lifeless as it had used to be. The life that was spreading through its reaches, however, was not the kind anyone in the waking world would welcome…

Eventually, he sighed and climbed on the Rhino's roof through one of the upper hatches. Since Samara was yet to return from the Dream Realm, Sunny was the only member of the cohort with decent means of ranged attack. Using the open lid of the hatch to shield himself from the cold winds, Sunny summoned Morgan's Warbow and peered into the dimness that surrounded the moving vehicle.

In the next few hours, he had to use his bow three times. Several stray abominations wandered into the Rhino's path, only to be slain by a swift black arrow before having the chance to approach it. Luckily, none of them turned out to be too powerful or laid a dangerous ambush.

'For now…'

By noon — which, of course, looked the same as morning, evening, and night — the Rhino reached the ruins of a small outpost, where two similar carriers were parked in the shadow of a broken wall. A handful of people could be seen gathered around a fire, having a cozy meal.

As Luster stopped the vehicle, Sunny jumped off the roof and walked toward the fire. Orange light gleamed, reflecting from the bleak metal of his armor.

"What are you guys drinking?"

The members of Queen's and Soul Reaper's cohort looked at him with wistful expressions.

"That, uh… just hot water, sir. The cargo capacity of our carriers is limited, so we couldn't bring anything better."

He shook his head, then summoned the Covetous Coffer. As the large chest manifested itself into reality and opened its toothy maw, Sunny thrust his hand inside, and then threw a can of instant coffee and an expensive chocolate bar to the startled Awakened.

"Oh… sir! Thank you, sir!"

The bunch of Irregulars did not look like people who were about to fight a Corrupted abomination of a high Class. They seemed relaxed and nonchalant about the whole ordeal, and paid more attention to the can of coffee than to a menacing mountain that loomed above them.

The Category Three Gate was situated on its peak.

As the grateful Awakened brewed coffee for themselves and Sunny's soldiers, who emerged from the Rhino and joined them, he looked around and noticed Master Jet and Winter. The two were standing some distance away, discussing something between themselves in low voices.

He headed toward them and caught the tail end of their conversation.

"...is definitely a woman. Hot as hell, too!"

"I am telling you, idiot, I saw that Mongrel guy myself once. He's definitely a man."

"Everyone knows that you're blind in both eyes when it comes to these things, Reaper. I mean… remember the time when that handsome Saint tried to hit on you?"

"What are you talking about? He was just hoping to cooperate with us to claim a new Citadel."

"Damn. You are hopeless, you know that? All men…"

At that moment, Sunny approached them, glanced at Master Jet, and then cleared his throat. Winter stared at him for a moment.

"See? Case in point!"

'What is that supposed to mean?'

As Sunny pondered what she alluded to, Master Jet smiled and waved at him.

"Ah, Sunny. You're just on time. The Saint should be arriving any moment now, too."

He couldn't help but frown.

"Who, exactly, is…"

At that moment, a vaguely familiar feeling suddenly overwhelmed him. Sunny sensed a massive shadow covering the ruined outpost, and then heard a sound that resembled the rustle of a thousand wings.

Suddenly, a fourth figure was standing among them.

Sunny blinked, momentarily lost for words.

"Saint... Saint Tyris? What are you doing here?"

In front of him stood none other than Sky Tide of the White Feather Clan.

Chapter-857: Jade Beetle

The woman standing in front of Sunny was tall and slender, with long hair that fell down in a gentle cascade of pale gold. Her posture was perfectly straight, and her cold face was dazzlingly beautiful.

Sky Tide was wearing a suit of light steel armor, with pauldrons and greaves decorated with stylized feathers. The gaze of her stern amber eyes was piercing and heavy, while her strange vertical pupils resembled that of a bird of prey.

Snowflakes swirled and danced in the air, as if trying to get closer to her.

Sunny was rather startled to see the familiar Transcendent.

"Saint Tyris? What… what are you doing here?"

Sky Tide glanced at him.

"Master Sunless... it is good to see you again. I am glad to find you in good health. As for why I am here, isn't it obvious? I have come to hunt the beast."

He shifted awkwardly.

"No... uh... I meant why are you here, in Antarctica?"

She stared at him expressionlessly.

"White Feather clan has been tasked with supporting the evacuation effort in the Southern Quadrant."

'Oh…'

Suddenly, a few things clicked into place. Back when Sky Tide had killed Saint Cormac to protect Sunny and Cassie, she told them that

she would be punished by the great clan Valor. She had also told them that they would not dare to penalize her too severely.

It seemed that having the Chained Isles taken away was not enough of a punishment for the willful Saint. Valor had to make a gesture by sending a token force to Antarctica, and so, the White Feather clan had drawn the short straw. It seemed that they had lost their idyllic demesne and were banished to the cold reaches of the war-torn continent, at least for the time being.

Looking around, Sunny suppressed a sad sigh. The dark and inhospitable land surrounding them was a far cry from the empyrean beauty of the Sanctuary of Noctis. He felt a bit guilty about the whole thing.

Sky Tide did not seem to mind, though… or at least hid her displeasure perfectly.

Master Jet, meanwhile, looked at them with curiosity.

"Ah. I have forgotten that the two of you know each other. In any case, we are grateful for your assistance, Saint Tyris."

Sky Tide simply nodded. Soon, the gaze of her striking amber eyes drifted to the tall mountain looming above the ruined outpost.

"What do we know about the enemy?"

Soul Reaper shook her head slightly.

"Not much…"

Then, she smiled and looked at the youngest member of the group.

"...Yet. Sunny, do your thing."

***

'Do your thing… do your thing? What kind of request is that?'

As Sunny grumbled silently, his shadows nimbly scaled the slopes of the mountain. By now, the range of Shadow Control had exceeded a

dozen kilometers, so it was not impossible for them to reach the peak.

There was hardly anyone better suited to spy on the Corrupted abomination. However…

Sunny grimaced as the Call of the Nightmare assaulted his mind. Now that he was observing a Category Three Gate, its subtle influence grew much stronger and harder to ignore.

There was a wide crack that had almost split the peak of the mountain in two. The dark rift of the Gate pulsed inside the cavernous schism, and there was stone debris littering the immediate area around it.

Many shards had rolled down the steep slopes, while a few giant boulders had even reached all the way down, smashing large parts of the outpost the Irregulars were currently hiding in and decimating the road that led to it.

Strangely, he did not notice the Nightmare Creatures immediately.

It was only after the creepy shadow, true to its name, crept closer that a sudden shiver ran through his body. Sunny noticed hundreds of shapes resting between the rocks.

The abominations were easy to miss because their carapaces were as white as the snow covering the top of the mountain, and had a texture that resembled rock. They looked like giant insects that were as large as adult humans. Some of them were Awakened, some were Fallen, and a few larger ones were even Corrupted.

None of them could compare to the enormous abomination hiding in the shadow of the shattered peak, however. With its smooth milky-white chitin and unmoving black eyes, the jade creature resembled an oversized, appalling, monstrous beetle. It was easily three times the size of the Rhino, with six mighty legs and terrifying mandibles that seemed powerful enough to crush heavily armored war platforms.

Looking at the motionless abomination, Sunny suddenly felt an eerie

sense of foreboding.

He glanced at Saint Tyris, Master Jet, and Winter with a dark expression.

"...It's a Tyrant, alright. Large, thick armor. Resembles an insect. There are around five hundred drones under its command, many of them Fallen. I've noticed at least two dozen Corrupted lieutenants, as well."

He lingered for a moment, and then called out:

"Kimmy!"

The seer of his cohort activated her Aspect Ability, allowing him to see the swarm of stone beetles in a new light.

Studying their tough carapaces, Sunny slowly listed a few vulnerable points, then shifted his gaze to the Tyrant.

Unlike its minions, the giant white beetle did not seem to possess any pronounced weak spots. Sunny did not know whether the armor of the powerful creature was that good or whether Kim simply could not peer through the defenses of an enemy that outranked and outclassed her so much, but the result was the same.

Killing the Tyrant was not going to be easy.

He shared what little information he had been able to gather and glanced at the other officers with doubt.

"So… what do we do now?"

Saint Tyris remained silent, but Master Jet smiled.

Her smile was dark and vicious.

"What else? We kill it."

Sunny blinked.

"How?"

Soul Reaper waited for a few moments, then looked at Sky Tide.

The Transcendent crossed her arms.

"I will handle the Tyrant. As long as it's bound to the ground, I can attack the creature with impunity. If one attack doesn't crack its shell, ten will. If ten attacks fail, a hundred will do the job."

She looked at the Irregulars and frowned:

"However, you will have to deal with its retinue. That task… is not going to be easy."

Winter snorted, and then suddenly laughed.

"Easy? What's that?"

Chapter-858: Aerial Superiority

They did not spend too much time trying to come up with a detailed plan. Firstly, because the Nightmare Creatures could have discovered the Irregulars at any moment. Secondly, because no plan they could come up with would have been reliable.

There was just too little information at their disposal. Without knowing what the Tyrant, the few Devils serving it, and the lesser soldiers of the stone hive were capable of, what was the point of creating rigid strategies?

The battle ahead was going to be decided by raw power, resolve, and ability to swiftly adapt to changing circumstances.

Luckily, the Irregulars had more than enough power at their disposal. With three elite Masters and an actual Saint leading them, there was hardly a more fearsome human force in the Antarctic Center.

Would that power be enough, though?

They were going to find out soon…

'How did I end up here?'

Creeping up the slope of the mountain with a morose expression, Sunny bitterly remembered his dreams of becoming a rich, decadent, cowardly shop owner. What was he doing on a continent drowning in Nightmare Gates, preparing to battle a Corrupted Tyrant and its army?

He could have been relaxing in the hot springs of a luxurious spa with a bunch of beauties right now… that was what rich people did, right?

Instead, Sunny hid behind a tall boulder, shivered in the cold, and

glanced at the handful of people pressing against rocks around him. Sure, there were plenty of beauties among them, as well… ah, but it wasn't the same…

It couldn't be more different, really.

'...Damn.'

There was still a good stretch of the mountain slope remaining until the peak. That high, the air was not devoid of oxygen yet, but it surely tasted different. None of the Awakened would be hindered by the slight hypoxia or suffer from the high-altitude illness, of course, but it still required some adjustment.

Sunny sighed and watched as Saint Tyris calmly walked forward. A swarm of sparks surrounded her hand, and then coalesced into a long javelin. At the same time, Winter summoned a strange silver bow and two arrows. She nocked one on the string of the bow and waited.

A shadow hiding at the peak of the mountain watched as one of the hideous insects wandered to the edge of a protruding rock outcropping and froze, its long antennae twitching in the wind.

Sunny frowned.

'I think… I think we're noticed!'

Before he could warn anyone, however, Sky Tide took one last step, raised her javelin… and silently threw it into the dark sky.

Her throw caused the snow around Saint Tyris to be cleared away by the gale of crushing wind. The rocks beneath her feet cracked.

In the next moment, a thunderous roar of a sonic boom rolled across the mountains as the javelin accelerated toward the peak with terrifying speed. It streaked across the sky like a radiant star, and then collided against the Tyrant's carapace with devastating force.

The milky-white chitin did not shatter, though.

The javelin shattered instead.

As Saint Tyris tilted her head a little, Winter shot an arrow almost straight up. It flew into the sky and then exploded with brilliant radiance, flooding the gloomy slope with bright light.

Illuminated by it, the Nightmare Creatures hiding behind the rocks moved.

They ran forward with surprising agility and then jumped, twisting their bodies into tight spheres. Hundreds of these spheres then rolled down, approaching the hiding Irregulars with terrible speed.

Sunny felt his heart growing heavy.

Because of how similar the carapaces of the stone hive soldiers were to actual rock, it seemed as if the mountain itself was falling on them.

And that wasn't all.

The Tyrant moved forward and opened its maw, disgorging a cloud of darkness from it. The cloud flowed down like an avalanche of volcanic ash, swallowing the figures of rolling drones as it overtook them.

'Bad!'

Sunny did not know what the black avalanche consisted of, but his intuition was screaming that inhaling, or even being touched by the black ash was deadly to humans.

At that moment, Sky Tide suddenly disappeared, and a massive shape shot forward from their formation. A giant bird of prey with white feathers and talons forged of lustrous steel appeared above the mountain, gaining speed as it flew into the sky. Her body was wreathed in a radiant mantle of dancing lightning bolts.

As Saint Tyris moved her enormous wings, the cloud of black ash was torn apart by the hurricane winds and dissipated long before reaching the Irregulars. She soared high into the dim sky and then plummeted down, aiming to savage the jade beetle with her terrifying beak.

The two monstrous creatures collided, and the Tyrant jumped back with an ear-piercing screech. A beam of darkness escaped from its

maw, but Sky Tide was already rising into the sky as she circled to deliver another devastating attack. The bolts of lightning gathered on her body and then shot forward, colliding with the dark beam.

It seemed to weaken considerably and missed the swift Saint, disappearing into the somber expanse of cold heavens.

A net of lightning descended from above and bit into the milky-white jade chitin of the Tyrant. A devastating thunderclap battered it like a physical attack. Tyris folded her wings and fell down again, leaving deep grooves on the enemy's armor with her talons. The whole mountain shook from the ferocious force of their clash.

Comparatively uninjured, but hopelessly outmatched by the flying opponent, the jade beetle seemed almost... aggrieved.

Its black eyes stared at the silhouette of the colossal bird with an indescribable, inhuman emotion.

And then, the Tyrant straightened. Its carapace suddenly seemed to split in the middle and move aside like a giant gate.

From beneath it, four long, translucent wings emerged and then blurred, causing the massive creature to rise into the air.

It would have been an eerily beautiful image... if it wasn't so dreadful.

Looking from below, Sunny gritted his teeth.

'Well… crap.'

Chapter-859: Summit

The Corrupted Tyrant and Sky Tide were of the same Rank, but there was an abyss of four entire Classes separating them. Nevertheless, Saint Tyris had been confident in her ability of defeating the perverse creature.

...As long as it was bound to the ground. That was what she had told them.

Watching the giant insect spread its four translucent wings and soar into the somber sky, both grotesque and eerily beautiful at the same time, Sunny froze for a moment. Then, he looked back down.

Nothing ever went according to plan. That was just the reality of things, and the Irregulars had been prepared to face unforeseen circumstances from the very start. Saint Tyris was going to have to manage, somehow, on her own… the rest of them had their own trial to face.

He couldn't spare attention to the titanic battle happening above.

Hundreds of Nightmare Creatures were bearing down upon the three cohorts of Irregulars like an avalanche. Contracted into balls of white chitin, the soldiers of the stone hive were rolling down the mountain slope with tremendous speed, all their vulnerable spots safely protected. Their advance could be easily seen in the light of Winter's radiant arrow.

Among them were Awakened, Fallen, and even Corrupted abominations. Beasts, Monsters, Demons, and even Devils. The air this close to the summit of the mountain was cold and thin, and unlike the previous battle, humans held an unfavorable position below the enemy.

Worse still, Sunny had yet to recover from yesterday's exertion. He

had barely half of his essence left. Saint and Nightmare were mending themselves in the dark flames of his soul after the clash with the powerful Gate Guardian. Things… weren't looking good.

'Whatever. More fragments for me…'

As he thought that, Winter sent a second arrow into the sky. It disappeared into the darkness and then seemed to explode into a thousand brilliant shards.

Her Aspect… was a strange one. From what Sunny knew, it combined some sort of powerful combat augmentation with an affinity to revelation. Winter was both a warrior and a seer.

As a result, she never missed. That was not an exaggeration, just a frightening and bizarre fact. She had literally never missed a shot since becoming an Awakened.

It did not matter what weapon Winter used, be it a bow, a sling, a throwing dagger, or simply a rock. They always struck true. Of course, simply being able to hit the target did not always mean victory. What made her truly formidable was an extensive arsenal of enchanted arrows that she had accumulated over the years.

Master Winter was basically a walking artillery unit.

As the thousand brilliant shards rained from the sky, each revealed itself to look like a small silver arrow. They bit into the mass of rolling abominations, shredding their carapaces and finding their way through the smallest cracks in the chitin armor. Instantly, fetid blue lymph flowed onto the snow-covered rocks.

A moment later, another arrow was already nocked on the string of Winter's bow, with several more already manifesting themselves from a whirlwind of sparks. Each appeared exactly as the previous one was sent flying. Shooting the bow with unnatural speed, she unleashed a squall of death on the mass of descending Nightmare Creatures.

Every arrow was unique, but absolutely deadly.

Studying the nimble, calculated, and lethal movements of the older Master, Sunny couldn't help but sigh.

'So that's what a professional looks like…'

He had a long way to go if he hoped to reach this realm of archery.

Soon, the other ranged fighters among the Irregulars joined the fray. Almost all members of Winter's own cohort were sharpshooters of some kind, so it easily outshone the rest in this phase of the battle, reaping dozens of abominable lives. Often, the Awakened marksmen aimed at the breaches in the white carapaces that the rain of arrows summoned by Winter had created.

As blue runes ignited on the silver limbs of her bow, she grinned:

"Show them hell! Whoever kills the most gets a hug, haha!"

The information about the weak spots of the stone hive soldiers that Kim and Sunny had provided also helped. Soon, he heard a familiar electric whine and saw a powerful explosion bloom among the abominations, ripping a few of them apart.

Samara was adding her prodigal firepower to the deadly onslaught of the ranged specialists.

Sunny, however, restrained himself from using a bow. In this battle, he needed to conserve his essence as much as possible. Plus, he was meant to play a different role.

The tide of abominations was almost upon them…

"Sunny!"

He turned around and saw Master Jet running at him. Her short raven black hair was dancing in the wind, and her eyes were burning with chilling blue light. There was a light armor of black leather wrapped tightly around her body, and a familiar dark glaive trailing behind her.

Lowering himself slightly, he interlocked his fingers and offered his hands to her as a step. As soon as Soul Reaper's foot landed in this cradle, he strained his muscles and threw her into the air.

Augmented by three shadows, his strength was nothing short of

monstrous. Boosted by Sunny, Jet flew forward as if she was an arrow herself.

The somber glaive flashed, cutting… no, passing through the body of one of the Corrupted abominations before it could even react. The creature rolled forward with tremendous speed for a few more moments, but then suddenly convulsed, unfurled its massive body, and came to a shuddering stop.

Its white carapace was perfectly whole, with not even a smallest crack on it… and yet, the massive beast was dead.

As Soul Reaper slid on the icy rocks, hundreds of abominations attacked the line of Irregulars and the swift human who had managed to kill one of their leaders. The massive balls of white chitin instantly unfurled into terrifying insect-like abominations and lunged at their victims, their sharp mandibles clicking and their segmented legs scraping against the stones.

Master Jet was already moving, dodging numerous attacks as she dashed toward the next Corrupted target.

Looking at her, Sunny blinked.

'Fast…'

Then, he had no more time to think.

Chapter-860: Stone Hive

Even though the archers managed to kill and wound a lot of Nightmare Creatures, there were still enough of them left to bury the Irregulars under a mass of chitinous bodies. Master Jet's sudden advance divided their attention and lessened the pressure on the rest of the human force, but that was not her primary goal.

In this battle, Soul Reaper was tasked with the most important objective — eliminating the Corrupted abominations that threatened to wipe out the Awakened soldiers.

Awakened were supposed to fight Nightmare Creatures of their own Rank. Facing a Fallen abomination was usually a recipe for disaster, and only a small amount of human warriors could be confident in defeating an overbearing foe like that. Killing a creature of a higher Rank was a rare enough accomplishment that it could substantially change one's reputation.

Still, it was not impossible. Sunny himself, as well as every other survivor of the Forgotten Shore, had slain plenty of beings that they had no business fighting. That was what made them so abnormal… in the terrible crucible of the Forgotten Shore, only the strongest of the strongest survived.

Of course, there were plenty of equal talents among the rest of the Awakened, and the elites chosen to become Irregulars were among them.

But they stood no chance against the Corrupted. The power gap of two Ranks was just too insurmountable. In the rarest of circumstances, a victory could still be possible… but usually, Awakened would not even be able to leave a scratch on the bodies of these monsters. No conventional weapon could harm them, either.

That was why the Corrupted lieutenants of the stone hive had to die

first. Considering that these revolting insects possessed immensely durable armor, Soul Reaper had been chosen to strike them down. Her dreadful Aspect, after all, allowed her to ignore all forms of physical protection.

That did not mean that the rest of the Irregulars were going to get it easy. Even without the strongest abominations, the rest of the hive was more than capable of tearing the few humans apart… unless humans destroyed them first.

This time, the terrain they had to fight on did not give the Irregulars any advantages. They could not create a layered formation where melee fighters held the enemies off in the front while the archers pelted them with arrows from the back. The small human force was destined to be instantly surrounded.

That was where Sunny came in.

Most of the Irregulars created a defensive line slightly higher up the slope, while the ranged specialists continued to shoot arrows and other projectiles over their heads. Their line bent like a crescent moon so that the abominations could not attack them from the sides. He alone stood behind the formation, holding the Cruel Sight and breathing deeply.

Sunny's task was simple. To not let even a single Nightmare Creature attack the human force from the back.

'Let's go…'

The tide of stone hive soldiers broke against the single blade of Soul Reaper's glaive, collided against the defensive line of Irregulars, and spilled over it. He saw a mass of abominations slide past him from the sides, slow down, then turn around and scurry back up the slope.

His fourth shadow had just returned and wrapped itself around the blade of the Cruel Sight, and at the same time, the Dying Wish called the enemies forth.

Sunny dashed forward with stunning speed. At the same time, the shadows around him seethed, and then exploded forward with four

long and powerful tentacles.

Each tentacle pierced the carapace of a nightmarish insect and tore its body apart. A moment later, the Cruel Sight shone with furious white light and slid into a thin crack between the thorax and the head of a Fallen abomination, turning its soft innards and brain into ash.

Sunny twisted his spear, decapitating the appalling creature. To his surprise, even without its head, the insect continued forward, trying to skewer him with two of its long, segmented legs.

With a startled snarl, Sunny crashed into it with his shoulder and sent the heavy monster flying back like a cannonball. At the same time, his shadow tentacles twisted and shot forward, breaking the legs of several more abominations.

'Bastards… do you really think you can touch me? Pathetic bugs like you… can never hope to kill a noble cockroach like me!'

Suddenly, a mad smile appeared on his face.

Grinning like a lunatic, Sunny spun in the growing tide of stone hive soldiers, killing them one after another. After the Red Colosseum, it was not hard for him to shadow Nightmare Creatures. Even though bestial abominations like these did not possess sentience, let alone refined battle techniques, they still had unique instincts, behavioral patterns, and character.

As such, he could mirror and predict their attacks just as well as that of humans.

In fact, it was much easier.

…But also much, much harder. It was not difficult to peer into the essence of their ferocious combat instincts and adopt them, but doing so put him in terrible peril. It was hard to not lose himself. It was hard to remain human.

Luckily, there was an anchor that held that which made Sunny a person together… his true name.

'Lost from Light…'

With its help, he could always return from the formless depths of Shadow Dance, no matter how far he dove into its strange embrace.

Stonelike chitin cracked and shattered. Blue lymph shot into the air. Broken mandibles and segmented limbs rolled away, severed by the ruthless blade of the Cruel Sight.

For now, Sunny managed to prevent any Nightmare Creatures from getting past him. Most fell into a murderous frenzy because of the Dying Wish and aimed to kill him and no one else, and the few that managed to shrug the effect off were dragged back and killed by the long and malleable shadow tentacles.

There were more and more abominations attacking him, though.

And among them, much more powerful creatures suddenly appeared.

An ominous feeling brushed against Sunny's mind.

'What the hell?'

He could have sworn that an especially large insect had been barreling toward him just a moment ago. Four tumorous growths of darkness within its body revealed that the giant abomination was a Fallen Devil.

But now, it was gone.

'Where is it?'

Before Sunny could find and answer, the mountain slope beneath his feet suddenly split open.

…And from it, a hungry maw appeared, too close and swift for him to escape.

Chapter-861: Entombed

The ground split open, and the head of a massive insect appeared from beneath. Sunny was thrown off balance, and much worse, there was no time for him to dodge the sudden attack. He could not even use Shadow Step.

'Crap!'

Before he could do anything, the maw of the Fallen Devil closed around one of his legs. Sharp mandibles scraped against his greave, smearing revolting mucus all over the bleak steel of the Undying Chain.

The good news was that his Transcendent armor turned out to be too tough to be bitten through by the damned abomination. No matter how hard the creature pressed with its jaws, the armored greave refused to bend or be pierced. It also withstood the corrosive effect of the liquid oozing from the insect's maw.

Perhaps things would have been different if Sunny did not possess such a high divine affinity, but with the [Brilliant Will] enchantment reinforcing his armor, it reached a stupendous level of durability.

The bad news, however… was that Sunny was completely immobilized. Even if the Fallen Devil could not bite off his leg, there were countless other abominations that were already dashing forward to press the attack and rip him apart. Every armor had its cracks, and the Undying Chain was no different.

"Let go, you filthy bug!"

Sunny reversed his grip on the Cruel Sight and thrust it down. His strike was so powerful that the incandescent blade pierced all the way through the impregnable chitin of the insect, cracking the thick plate protecting its forehead and melting parts of it away.

Despite the terrible wound, the Devil refused to die. Even with its listless black eyes turning into liquid and evaporating, it rose from the ground and then viciously jerked the upper part of his torso, swinging Sunny into the ground.

No matter how tough his armor was, at this point, human bones would have snapped and shattered. However, [Bone Weave] stubbornly held his femur and tibia together.

It hurt like hell, though.

"Argh!"

Slamming into the rocks, Sunny stubbornly thrust his spear deeper into the Devil's head and then briefly glanced at the approaching soldiers of the stone hive. Following his command, the shadow tentacles shot forward and crushed a few closest ones.

At the same time, two dark hands appeared from his lower torso and grabbed the Devil's jaws, trying to pry them apart.

It was of no use. The creature was just too strong.

…The Fallen Devil possessed a wicked intelligence, too.

Seeing that neither its bite nor its slam managed to damage the thorny opponent, it decided to change tactics. Instead of trying to savage the enemy, the giant insect simply clenched its jaw tighter… and then dove into the ground, pulling Sunny with it.

The solid stone parted around them like liquid.

'Not good…'

Like every human, Sunny harbored a deeply rooted fear of being buried alive. And this was exactly what was happening… pulled dozens of meters into the solid stone, he was going to be buried under its crushing weight if the Devil let go.

Perhaps that was exactly the bastard's plan.

Before that could happen, however, Sunny snarled and thrust the

Cruel Sight even deeper, pushing it into the body of the Devil as far as he could. At the same time, he commanded the spear to assume its maximum length, and then sent all four of his shadows from his body onto the somber blade.

Augmented by them, the divine flame summoned by the [Dark Mirror] enhancement suddenly grew even hotter. For a moment, it seemed as though the giant insect became illuminated from within. A blinding light escaped from the cracks of its carapace, and then, the Devil contorted in a terrible convulsion.

Just a few seconds later, it was immolated from within, turning into nothing but an empty, blackened shell.

[You have slain a Fallen Devil, Stone Titan Flea.]

[Your shadow grows stronger…]

Sunny shuddered, feeling his heart turn cold.

'That's great, but…'

The Devil was dead, and so, its unnatural power dissipated. The stone surrounding them turned back into its solid state, encasing Sunny in a cold, inescapable coffin.

There was no light, no room to move, no air to breathe. Even with a Master's prodigious might, digging himself out was impossible. A creeping horror entered Sunny's mind...

Luckily, he was not just any Master.

Stretching his Shadow Sense upward, Sunny simply used Shadow Step and emerged from a stretch of darkness above ground.

…The cold air of Antarctica had never felt so sweet. The inhospitable, dim sky had never looked so beautiful.

Suppressing the desire to fall to his knees and take a gasping breath, Sunny swiftly looked around to evaluate the situation.

He had only been absent from the battlefield for a dozen heartbeats…

but in a clash like this one, just a few seconds was an eternity.

Just as he had suspected, things were not looking great. His absence left the rear of the human formation wide open, and a tide of stone hive soldiers was already flowing up the slope, approaching it. Most were already well outside the range of effect of the Dying Wish. That was really, really bad.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'I have to come up with something. Fast!'

Since there was no time to think, only a single idea came to mind. It could lead to a lot of unforeseen circumstances, but forced to act immediately, he did not see any other choice.

Commanding the Extraordinary Rock to relay his command, Sunny barked:

"Samara, Kimmy! Turn around and open fire!"

At the same time, he… dismissed his armor.

As both of his soldiers unleashed a hail of bullets at the flood of abominations advancing from the back, the Undying Chain disappeared into a swarm of sparks. At the same time, wisps of dark fog swirled around his body.

For a few seconds, Sunny was left without any protection.

Ignoring that chilling fact, he dove into the mass of Nightmare Creatures, rampaging between them as the dark fog slowly coalesced into a different suit of armor. Luckily — or rather due to his panicked effort — no attack managed to land on his body in that time.

Glossy onyx, ominous lines, intricate and ancient design.

Finally, the Mantle of the Underworld wove itself into existence. His shadows slid onto its black surface.

Merged with it, the Dying Wish was suddenly augmented by the [Underworld Armament] enchantment.

The Nightmare Creatures advancing on the rear of the human formation slowed down and stalled. Then, they froze in place.

And then, one after another, they slowly turned around and peered at Sunny.

Subjected to an almost palpable pressure of immense hatred and bloodlust, he smiled nervously.

"Uh… come eat me, bastards. Look! I am very tasty!"

With fervor and frenzy that made him shudder, the mass of Nightmare Creatures obliged.

Chapter-862: Soul Reaper

The [Death Wish] enchantment worked.

…In fact, it worked a little bit too well.

'Damn! Damn! Damn!'

Sunny was drowning in the tide of Nightmare Creatures. No matter how strong he was, no matter how fast he was, no matter how well he understood the attack patterns of the stone hive soldiers, there were just too many of them for him to handle without paying the price.

The Mantle of the Underworld sustained more and more hits. The onyx armor mostly held, for now, and what little damage it did sustain was swiftly mended by the [Living Stone] enchantment. His body beneath it, however, was hurting. There were no holes in him yet, but it was just a matter of time.

If there was one good thing about the situation, however, it was that the Irregulars were completely safe from being attacked from the back. Sunny was holding the mass of abominations advancing from the rear single-handedly, killing more and more of them as he desperately tried to survive.

By now, all the snow around him had melted, and the rocks were covered by the viscous blue lymph. Savaged carcasses of Nightmare Creatures littered the ground, and three shadow tentacles were rampaging among those that remained.

The fourth had been destroyed by another Fallen abomination, whom Sunny then finished off with the shining blade of the Cruel Sight.

The twilight enveloping the summit of the mountain was long gone. High above, a constant stream of lightning tore the darkness of the

cold sky, and on the mountain slope itself, chaotic flashes of light produced by Winter and other Awakened ensnared in a bloody battle with the stone hive created a strange and beautiful illumination.

Sunny himself was surrounded by nothing except for darkness, however, since the Shadow Lantern devoured any light that reached him.

'I can't go on like this for much longer…'

His only solace was that he did not need to. Soon, help would arrive. Sunny just had to hold on long enough for Master Jet to finish off the Corrupted lieutenants of the hive and join the battle against the lesser abominations.

Slaying a score of Corrupted was not something an Ascended was supposed to be able to do… but he had faith in Soul Reaper's ability. After all, even Saints were wary of fighting her.

Speaking of Colonel Jet…

Killing a frenzied Fallen beast with a devastating slash of the Cruel Sight and at the same time piercing the head of an Awakened monster with the ghostly blade of the Moonlight Shard, Sunny used the carcasses of the dead creatures to buy himself a moment of respite and glanced higher up the slope, where Soul Reaper was in a similar position as him — drowning in abominations as she was trying to hunt down the strongest among them before they could hunt her.

Master Jet was moving with murderous purpose and terrifying speed, dodging the storm of attacks as she descended upon one Corrupted after another, the blade of her glaive ignoring all physical armor as it viciously struck directly at their darkness-infested soul cores.

All of it was very bizarre, and also gave him a better understanding of why Soul Reaper was so feared by other Awakened.

Very few humans possessed powerful means of defending themselves from soul attacks. However, she was not even delivering blows infused with soul damage… instead, her glaive was somehow able to

deliver physical damage directly to the souls of her enemies. More than that, it could bypass all forms of armor and strike at the vulnerable cores.

'Scary…'

But there was more strangeness about how Master Jet fought. She was just too fast, too strong… too deadly. Even knowing that her cohort was assembled based on their ability to augment the combat performance of their commanding officer, Sunny could not explain how Soul Reaper was so frighteningly powerful.

Just her physical prowess alone was almost on par with his own, which was not supposed to be possible. Not only did Sunny possess more cores, he also enjoyed the enhancement of shadows. And yet, he couldn't deny what he saw.

Her battle style, meanwhile, was brutal and domineering, honed and perfectly sharpened to achieve a single purpose — deliver swift death and utter devastation to her enemies. While it lacked flair and refinement, when Sunny looked at how Soul Reaper fought, he felt something that he had never felt before.

It was the lethal weight of thousands and thousands of deathly battles... he did not think he had ever encountered a human fighter that seemed to possess quite as much combat experience. Her technique possessed a dark depth to it that he had yet to sense from anyone else.

Not even Pierce and Welthe, two high-ranking Knights of Valor, could compare to Soul Reaper Jet. Not even the Saints he had met.

It made sense, in hindsight. Saints serving Legacy clans might have been more powerful, but they led a very different life than someone like Master Jet. The government was always short on personnel and resources, and so, every capable fighter serving them had to do more.

Considering that Soul Reaper was possibly the most capable of them, she had to also be one of the most active government operatives.

What it meant was that while Masters and Saints of the Legacy clans

only undertook the most important combat missions and enjoyed sufficient rest between each battle, she had been sent to deal with emerging Gates, rampaging Nightmare Creatures, Awakened criminals, and other dangerous issues almost every single day.

No wonder Master Jet always seemed a bit sleep-deprived.

Battle after battle, day after day… considering that she had entered government service more than a decade ago, that would indeed make Soul Reaper the most seasoned human fighter Sunny had ever met, at least in terms of pure number of combat encounters and confirmed kills.

Strangely, not even the other Irregular captains seemed as accomplished in battle and slaughter, despite being older than Jet.

Suddenly, he was overcome by burning curiosity.

'I wonder if I can shadow her combat technique…'

At the level of Masters, a battle style was more than just a set of moves combined with a special mental framework. Due to how intricate their control of essence was, a style also included unique patterns of essence reinforcement.

Knowing that he only had a split second left before his own battle would continue, Sunny strained his eyes and peered beneath the surface of Master Jet's mortal shell.

After reaching the third step of Shadow Dance, his ability to observe and understand the flow of essence had vastly improved, and so…

However, what he saw left him shaken and disturbed.

Chapter-863: Fractured

Sunny had seen souls that were radiant and full of light, and he had seen souls that were being consumed by a spreading corruption.

However, he had never seen a soul like Jet's.

It was lightless and shrouded in darkness, almost like his own. A single powerful core burned in its depths, superposed against her heart… the core itself was strange, bizarre, and filled him with an eerie sense of profound unease.

The ethereal orb was irregularly shaped and much larger than it was supposed to be, grossly overshadowing the size of other Ascended cores he had witnessed. Its surface was covered by a net of deep, twisting cracks… no, not quite. It was more like the whole core was assembled from numerous shards, as if it had been shattered once and then crudely assembled back into an uneven sphere.

Some shards seemed to match each other, while others did not fit well, bringing a sense of chaos to an already flawed and fractured, disfigured construct of Soul Reaper's core. However, there was also a certain order and beauty to the ugly disharmony of it.

The patchwork sphere of broken shards shone with furious, radiant light. It was brimming with a stunning amount of soul essence, which was much more than an Ascended should have possessed. However, unlike most cores, this one's radiance was not uniform. Instead, most of the light was concentrated in its depths, while the outer edges were dark and dull.

More than that, thin streams of light were constantly flowing through the cracks of the shattered core and dissipating into nothingness. They were like water slowly seeping out of a cracked vessel.

Despite that, Master Jet's essence did not seem to be diminishing.

Instead, as Sunny watched, the strange soul core only grew brighter.

'What the…'

At that moment, Soul Reaper had just slaughtered another Corrupted abomination. This one had taken her longer to put down, since as a Monster, it possessed two cores. Each had to be destroyed with separate strikes.

As soon as both perished, however, the creature twitched and collapsed to the ground. Then, something strange happened…

When the Corrupted insect died, a flood of tainted essence seemed to rush into Master Jet's fractured core. The remnants of the fetid darkness permeating it were then burned away by the furious light, and soon, a stream of pure radiance flowed into the brilliant center of the shining sphere.

Sunny was left very puzzled by what he had just seen… and a little bit troubled, as well.

'I guess there really are all kinds of bizarre Aspects…'

He was one to talk. His own soul was not exactly the picture of normalcy.

In any case, distracted by the unusual nature of Master Jet's soul core, Sunny had missed his chance to study her battle technique. All he managed to notice was that her flesh was saturated by essence to a much larger degree than usual.

It was as if, unlike all the other Awakened, Soul Reaper's ability to reinforce herself with essence was not limited by the modest capacity of human flesh, or at least had a limit so high that it put the rest of them to shame.

That would partially explain why she was so strong and fast despite possessing only a single core. This just went to show that having multiple cores was not an absolute advantage… there were a lot of strange and unimaginable powers out there, many of which could achieve the same result through different means.

However, they wouldn't be as versatile.

'Would I be able to win against her in a fight?'

Sunny was not sure. He was reasonably confident in his ability, but then again, as someone who often achieved victory through being underestimated, he did not want to fall into the same trap.

Even if he won, what would be the cost? Losing one or two cores was not going to kill him, most likely, but being left with a crippled soul was small consolation for victory.

Maybe that was why Saints were reluctant to fight Soul Reaper despite being much more powerful than her… and why many people treated her with fear and resentment.

Sunny would have loved to ponder on these issues, but sadly, his time was up.

The stone hive soldiers were already jumping over the carcasses he had used to hide behind, and their frenzy was just as murderous as before.

Gripping the Cruel Sight, he lunged forward and pushed it into the tough carapace of another enemy.

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Hundreds of Nightmare Creatures descended upon the three cohorts of the Irregulars. With Soul Reaper diving into their tide alone to hunt down the most dangerous foes, the initial clash was not as obliterating as it could have been. Supported by Queen and her sharpshooters, the melee fighters held, but were instantly surrounded.

Behind them, Master Sunless — the youngest of the First Company captains — was somehow holding off the entire flanking force of abominations by himself. Even if Irregulars had time to look back, they wouldn't see much except for a veil of strange darkness that refused to dissipate despite the constant flashes of bright light produced by the battle.

All they could perceive were the deafening shrieks of dying Nightmare Creatures and the cracking noises of parting chitin that resounded from the depths of unnatural darkness, as well as smell the sickening stench of burning flesh.

One of the soldiers staggered back after killing another bug and briefly looked back. At that exact moment, a disfigured body of a massive Fallen Beast flew out of the darkness and crashed onto the rocks, splattering fetid blue lymph all over the mountain slope.

It was more or less torn into two halves…

Not cut. Torn.

The soldier shuddered.

'Gods… what kind of monster is that kid…'

Suddenly, a blinding flash momentarily turned the world white. High above them, two gargantuan forms clashed furiously, producing a deafening thunderclap. The whole mountain shook from the violent force of their impact.

Cursing his luck, the Irregular tried to throw all unnecessary thoughts out of his mind and lunged back into the deadly melee. There were still hundreds of the damned bugs for them to kill.

By his side, other soldiers of the First Irregular Company fought for their lives. No one faltered, no one allowed despair to poison their mind. Each of them gave it their all, full of determination and resolve worthy of the government's best.

And yet, things weren't going too well. The enemy was just too numerous, vicious, and overwhelming.

Worse than that, the cursed bugs were wickedly smart and coordinated.

Something had to change soon…

Chapter-864: Breaking the Balance

Stuck in the middle of a neverending massacre, barely holding on, and sensing a ruinous hint of exhaustion already seeping into his muscles, Sunny knew that the battle was entering its decisive stage.

For now, it seemed to remain in a fragile equilibrium. The jade beetle and Saint Tyris were clashing somewhere high above, neither of them capable of striking down the adversary yet. On the ground, Master Jet was fighting alone in the tide of Nightmare Creatures, seeking out the most powerful foes. She had already killed many, but her task was far from being accomplished.

The Irregulars held, pushing back against the rabid onslaught of the stone hive. They had managed to avoid being overwhelmed, but could not throw the enemy back and go on the offensive. Even with Winter and her sharpshooters taking out the most deadly Fallen abominations, the situation was extremely precarious.

And finally, Sunny was protecting the rear of the formation. He was containing his share of Nightmare Creatures, as well, but was not anywhere near prevailing against them. For every hive soldier he killed, two immediately took its place.

Neither side could wipe out the other. This balance, however, could be destroyed at any moment.

Time was working against the Irregulars, for the most part, since their soul essence and endurance were not infinite. The soldiers were not going to be able to keep up with the ruthless tempo of the furious battle for much longer.

Their only hope was that Soul Reaper would finish off the last of the Corrupted abominations and join the fight against the mass of lesser

soldiers soon. However, from a few glimpses that Sunny had caught, things weren't going too well for the commander of the First Irregular Company.

Master Jet had quickly dealt with the comparatively weak Corrupted, but now, only the most powerful of them remained. More than that, the stone hive seemed to have understood how much of a threat this single human represented. With each second, it was getting harder and harder for Soul Reaper to move and attack her targets.

She would probably be able to kill them all eventually, but was that going to be fast enough?

Currently, Sunny was not sure.

'I need to do something…'

He had extinguished the divine flames burning within the blade of the Cruel Sight to conserve essence, and was now fighting against the frenzied abominations with nothing but its somber silver steel. Mounds of corpses surrounded him, and more creatures were jumping over their fallen brethren every second to lunge at the hateful human.

'But what can I do?'

How was he supposed to break the balance of the battle in favor of the human force?

He had already done his best to gain the upper hand in his own section of the battlefield… and failed. Preventing the soldiers of the stone hive from advancing at the rest of the Irregulars was all that he could achieve here.

Changing the scales of the main frontline was also outside his ability. If Sunny chose to join the Awakened fighters, they would gain a boost of inspiration from the Dying Wish… however, they would also be forced to split their focus and defend against attacks from two directions. Whatever benefit he could bring would be invalidated by the increased pressure.

Assisting Master Jet was out of the question… although Sunny was

more than capable of slaying a Corrupted abomination or several, it would take him some time. Not to mention that to achieve real results, he was going to have to abandon his position behind the formation of the Irregulars.

So then… only one component of the battle remained.

Dodging an especially fierce attack of a bloodthirsty bug, he used one of the shadow tentacles to suddenly pull himself away from the advancing enemies and pierced the body of a somewhat startled abomination a dozen meters further down the slope instead.

Then, he briefly looked up.

Two giant shapes were entangled with each other high in the dark skies. Arcs of lightning danced between them, and rivers of caustic black ash were flowing through the air like clouds.

His face turned grim.

'It's too strong. I can't kill it. Can't kill it fast enough…'

But then again… did he need to?

Deciding something, Sunny sighed and threw the Cruel Sight into the maw of a lunging abomination. Then, he closed his eyes and tried to forget about the fact that he was surrounded by a swarm of Nightmare Creatures, each of them driven crazy by the desire to tear him apart.

The shadows unleashed from the small lantern that was tied to his belt suddenly surged forward and formed a barrier around him. Even the tentacles that had been slaughtering hive soldiers dissipated and merged into its dark walls.

Within the barrier, Sunny summoned Morgan's Warbow.

As a swarm of scarlet sparks appeared in the air, a heavy blow shook the shadow cage he had constructed around himself. Then, another, and another, and another. Soon, countless strikes were raining on it, making the surface of the barrier shake and crack.

Sunny had made the cage as durable as he could. Infused with his Ascended essence, it was much more resilient than the armored hull of the mighty battleship he had once helped preserve.

And yet, just a few breaths later, it was already crumbling. Wide cracks appeared on its surface, and then a sharp chitin blade shot through one of them, scraping against the onyx surface of the Mantle of the Underworld and throwing Sunny back.

However, it was enough.

As the black bow appeared in his hand, Sunny commanded the shadow cage to transform itself. Immediately, it lost solidity and substance… instead, long and sharp spikes shot forward from the barrier in all directions.

A few abominations were skewered by them, but most were only stalled for a moment as deep scratches appeared on their carapaces.

Not paying them any attention, Sunny looked up and drew his bow.

[Soul Arrow].

[Death Dealer].

This time, a lustrous arrow that appeared to be made out of pale gold appeared on the string. Its wide broadhead, which was perfect for slicing flesh and dealing devastating wounds, was radiating a soft golden radiance.

As time seemed to slow down, Sunny took aim, wrapped his shadows around the arrow, and then sent it soaring into the sky.

Flying through the darkness, the arrow reached its target almost instantly.

The target, of course, was the Corrupted Tyrant.

However, Sunny was not aiming to kill it. He knew all too well that a creature like that would not be destroyed by a single strike, no matter how much essence he poured into it.

The golden arrow did not strike the milky-white chitin, or pierce the creature's eye.

Instead, it hit one of its translucent wings, tore through it, and then bit deep into the base of another one.

At the same time, Sunny activated a third enchantment.

[Burden of Peace] Enchantment Description: "After soul arrows pierce the flesh of an enemy, their weight can be drastically increased."

Lodged deep into the jade beetle's flesh, the golden arrow suddenly grew as heavy as a ship's anchor.

Far below the monstrous Tyrant, Sunny smiled in satisfaction.

'Try and fly away now, bastard…'

Chapter-865: Lucky Shot

Sunny was not powerful enough to casually slay a Corrupted Tyrant... yet. Defeating one was not outside the realm of possibility for him anymore, but it would require a good amount of meticulous study and preparation. Even then, challenging a Nightmare Creature of such immense power meant dire risk to his life.

However, Sunny did not really need to kill the jade beetle.

All he really needed to do was to break the balance of power between the monstrous Tyrant and Sky Tide.

Something like that was more easily said than done, but Sunny had several advantages that very few people possessed. He had a bow created by the best forgemasters of the great clan Valor, or maybe even King Anvil himself. That bow demanded immense strength to be drawn, but was capable of sending arrows much further, and imbued them with much greater force.

He had the [Death Dealer] enchantment, a rare divine affinity that translated into highly destructive soul arrows, and the ability to see through the darkness devouring the cold sky of Antarctica.

More importantly, he had enough power and ability to buy himself enough time to make a good shot.

As a result, the divine arrow he had sent tore through one of the Tyrant's wings and dealt modest damage to another. Just like that, two of the four wings of the jade beetle were wounded.

That alone might have not robbed it of the ability to fly, but combined with the weight of the [Burden of Peace], the result severely reduced the creature's mobility in the air. Sadly, it did not plummet to the earth as Sunny had hoped.

But it was enough to give Saint Tyris a crucial advantage.

Using the window of opportunity created for her by Sunny's arrow, she lunged into a recklessly committed attack without wasting a single moment. Slashing at the two untouched wings of the jade beetle with her steel talons, Sky Tide finally managed to break them.

Then, she delivered a terrible blow with her beak and threw the abomination down.

Wounded and barely able to keep its weight in the air, the Corrupted Tyrant was ruthlessly sent into a perilous fall. The jade beetle tried to slow down the speed of it, but failed. A few moments later, the massive body hit the slope of the mountain with a thunderous crash…

However, Sunny was too busy to see any of this.

Because, while his arrow had managed to turn the tables of the titanic clash in the skies…

He had to survive the consequences of that success, somehow!

Sunny had to burn through a lot of essence to have a hope of dealing serious damage to the Corrupted Tyrant, and so, his reserves were now very close to being empty. He had discarded the Cruel Sight to summon Morgan's Warbow and buy himself enough time to create the shadow cage, and so, he was now more or less unarmed in front of the swarm of Nightmare Creatures.

He had wrapped the soul arrow in three of his four shadows, and so, they needed time to return. Even worse, making the fateful shot left him open to enemy attacks for far too long.

Even before Sky Tide delivered her vicious strike, Sunny was already dearly regretting his actions.

Dismissing both the warbow and the distant Cruel Sight, he then summoned the latter back. However, the somber spear would only appear after several precious seconds, leaving him not much choice but to face the avalanche of chitin and sharp mandibles with his bare hands, or the short and thin blade of the Moonlight Shard at best.

Instead of using the ghostly stiletto, though, Sunny simply commanded one of the wild shadows surrounding him to flow into his hands and turn into a dark odachi.

Manipulating the shape of shadows was not a straightforward task. Forming a simple tentacle was the easiest, since it was not too far removed from the natural state of the shadows. However, the more precise, specific, and compressed the shape was, the more concentration and essence it took to achieve it.

A sword hard enough to withstand the rigors of battle and sharp enough to cut through the flesh of the enemies was not easy to create. Usually, it would have taken Sunny some time and a lot of mental exertion to make one from a formless shadow…

However, the black odachi appeared in his hands almost instantly.

That was because Sunny had methodically trained several applications of Shadow Manifestation during the six calm months after the Second Nightmare. He had come up with a small number of forms that could serve his basic needs in battle — such as a barrier, a spike, a chain, a sword — and created them over and over again, day after day, until manifesting them became an instinct.

That was why it only took a split second for the shadow sword to manifest when he needed it.

…Of course, as a blade created from Ascended essence, it was comparable to an Ascended weapon in terms of sharpness and lethality.

Sunny was just not sure how long he would be able to maintain the dark odachi, considering that keeping it tangible was slowly eating through the scarce remains of his essence.

'Crap!'

He barely managed to meet the first foe with a strike, neatly cutting its body in two halves. Although Sunny had long grown accustomed to using a spear, holding a sword still felt the most familiar to him. Fighting with an odachi again felt like meeting an old friend…

He would have smiled if there was not a crushing wave of abominations falling down on him.

Sharp blades of chitin struck at the Mantle of the Underworld, throwing Sunny off balance. Using the residual momentum of his previous strike, he slashed with the odachi and severed the legs of a Fallen beast attacking him, then thrust his sword forward, piercing the head of another…

Something crashed into him from the side, causing Sunny to stagger.

'Bad…'

Sunny paled as he realized that a moment later, he would fall and become buried under a mass of abominations.

Luckily, at that moment, something massive and dreadfully heavy crashed into the mountain with terrible speed.

The impact caused the whole slope to tremble, as if from a powerful earthquake.

As a result, not only Sunny, but also every other Irregular, as well as every soldier of the stone hive, were suddenly thrown to the ground.

Chapter-866: White Stone

A huge cloud of snow and stone debris rose into the air. Hitting the ground with a muffled yelp, Sunny rolled and tried to maintain the shape of his odachi. Luckily, his training had not been in vain — even after being startled by the earth-splitting fall of the Tyrant and jolted by the sudden collision with the slope of the mountain, he did not allow the shadow sword to unravel.

'Argh… damn…'

Slightly disoriented, Sunny sat up and looked around, expecting to see monstrous insects rushing to finish him off. To his relief, the soldiers of the stone hive were in a similar position as him — despite possessing six legs and a center of gravity that was much lower to the ground relative to their height, they were all sprawled on the cold rocks, trying to get up.

Actually, there were surprisingly few of them around him. Those that were alive, at least… crushed corpses littered this particular stretch of the slope, flattened so thoroughly that it was hard to recognize the shape of the chitin-clad abominations.

Sunny strained to regain his wits and frowned.

'...Did I do that?'

The damage seemed too exaggerated to be done by Sunny or his shadow tentacles. He couldn't see very far, either, because a wall of white stone was blocking his view.

'Where… where did this crag come from?'

If he remembered correctly, there were no large boulders or tall outcroppings near where he had fought. Had he rolled that far down the slope?

As Sunny was trying to understand why a wall of rock suddenly appeared in front of him, a stream of inky black liquid flowed down its smooth white surface.

Then, the wall of stone slightly moved.

...His eyes widened.

'Oh… crap…'

Craning his neck, Sunny managed to get a better look at the thing that he had assumed to be a stone cliff. Of course, it was not.

Instead, it was the carapace of the Corrupted Tyrant that had been thrown into the mountain by Sky Tide's vicious attack. The creature seemed battered, with its milky-white chitin cracked in several places and leaking viscous black blood… but very much alive.

In fact, at the same time as Sunny looked up at it, the jade beetle's expressionless black eye shifted and peered directly at him. Its terrifying mandibles move slightly.

'Oh, crap!'

Sunny jumped back at the same time as one of Tyrant's legs came down, shattering the mountain slope and sending another tremor running through it. He was only saved by his quick reaction and a bit of luck.

The shadow odachi whistled through the air and struck the white chitin, only to bounce off of it without dealing any damage. The jade beetle stared at him with its unfathomable black eyes and moved, slowly rising. It opened its maw, where a cloud of black ash was already swirling, ready to be spat out.

Sunny knew that if that ash enveloped him, something very bad was going to happen.

For a split second, he was paralyzed by fear.

Then, the familiar weight of the Cruel Sight calmed Sunny down. The somber spear finally finished manifesting itself into reality, and he

instinctively caught it by letting go of the hilt of the shadow odachi with one hand.

'What difference does it make?!'

Sunny stared at the domineering Tyrant in horror, and then did the only thing he could think of — infusing some of his last drops of essence into the Cruel Sight to imbue it with an elemental property, he threw the spear again, only a moment after being reunited with it.

He did have enough presence of mind to put some thought into what type of elemental damage to choose, though. Neither divine flame nor soul damage would do much in this situation, so…

'Ah, that might work… I think?'

The somber spear disappeared into the cloud of darkness wreathing in the creature's maw without a trace. A moment later, the Tyrant suddenly shuddered and let out a shrill, deafening shriek. Its movements slowed down for a second or two.

…That was more than enough time to give Sunny a chance to run away. Turning around, he dashed up the slope with as much speed as he could muster. The cloud of ash shot to chase him, but quickly dissipated due to the fact that the jade beetle was distracted by torturous pain.

The element Sunny had chosen was not the most destructive, but it was insidious, persistent, and extremely painful… that element was corrosion.

To be more precise, it was a special kind of wicked corrosion that the [Dark Mirror] had memorized after Sunny inhaled a lungful of Wormvine's poisonous miasma back on the Shipwreck Island.

Blood Weave had overcome it without any trouble, so he did not expect to deal much damage to the Tyrant. However, it had hurt like hell to deal with it, so Sunny hoped that the damned monstrosity would be distracted for a few seconds, giving him a chance to retreat.

'That's right… retreat with dignity. Not run away in panic!'

As he swiftly… retreated… Sunny felt a cold shiver running down his spine. The jade beetle had to be preparing another attack.

At that moment, a shadow fell from the sky. Saint Tyris — in her human form and wielding a saber that seemed sharp enough to cut the fabric of the world itself — flashed through the air and collided with the Corrupted Tyrant somewhere behind his back.

Sunny, meanwhile, finally saw the battlefield through the cloud of snow that had been thrown up by the jade beetle's fall.

The Irregulars were slowly rising to their feet, and so were the soldiers of the stone hive. Only one figure appeared to have withstood the earthquake and used the shock of it to her advantage.

Some distance away, Master Jet landed on the swaying body of the last Corrupted abomination and thrust her glaive deep into its flesh. A vicious smile appeared on her face as the creature shuddered and fell down.

The battle formation of Awakened warriors was broken, but Soul Reaper was finally finished with her dreadful task. Despite how much she must have exerted herself to slay a score of Corrupted beasts and monsters, as well as a couple demons, she seemed to be still brimming with essence. Master Jet would be able to join the main line of the First Irregular Company soon.

The flanking force that Sunny had been holding back, meanwhile, seemed to be all but destroyed by his own efforts and the devastating fall of the Tyrant. What little remained of it was currently being torn to pieces by the furious confrontation of the jade beetle and Sky Tide.

…All in all, the situation was not too terrible. The scales definitely tilted in the favor of humans now.

They just had to capitalize on that advantage.

Running terribly low on essence, battered, and exhausted, Sunny let out a silent groan.

'Damn it... damnation! This is just day two…'

Chapter-867: Tooth and Nail

The tide of the battle had turned.

The terrifying confrontation between the Tyrant of the Stone Hive and Sky Tide of the White Feather clan went on, but now, the eerily beautiful jade beetle was clearly losing.

On the battlefield itself, the force of abominations trying to attack the Irregulars from the rear had been decimated under the cover of unnatural darkness. The Corrupted lieutenants leading the main assault had been dealt with by Soul Reaper. Although the human soldiers had been feeling hints of despair just a few minutes ago, now, a new strength filled their bodies.

"Fight! We can do this!"

"Crush the bugs!"

The Irregulars knew that the moments when hope finally shined from the distance were often the most dangerous, so they did not allow themselves to relax and fought with fierce determination.

Then, something strange happened. The veil of darkness enveloping the lower part of the slope suddenly flowed forward and drowned a large swath of Nightmare Creatures assaulting their defensive line from the flank. Immediately, frenzied shrieks of the abominations resounded from it, only to stop abruptly in the cracking noise of splitting chitin.

At the same time, Soul Reaper Jet broke through the ranks of the hive and joined the crescent battle formation.

Suddenly reassured, the humans fought with doubled ferocity.

The effect was even more pronounced for the members of one of the

cohorts, who could actually see through the unnatural darkness thanks to Kim's unique Aspect.

Luster, who had lost count of the number of repulsive bugs he had killed or wounded with his halberd, threw a quick glance to the flank of the defensive line and almost stumbled.

'W—what?'

Out there in the darkness, their captain was dancing between the abominations, slaying one after another with graceful strikes of a long and somber blade. His swordsmanship was elegant and exquisite. However, what stunned the young man was not the battle skill of their commanding officer, but the armor Captain Sunless was wearing, as well as the shape and color of his odachi.

'That's… that's Mongrel's armor and sword!'

Luster's eyes widened.

'Don't tell me…'

Suddenly, a lot of things made sense.

Influenced by the [Death Wish] enchantment that spread to those who witnessed Sunny fight, an intense fire ignited in Luster's heart. His eyes gleamed, and he threw himself into the battle with burning determination.

'More, more… I need to kill more!'

After learning their captain's true identity, Luster was extremely inspired. He had given up on his goal not long after the clash with the stone hive started, but now, it did not seem as impossible anymore.

'I must vanquish these abominable bugs! If I kill enough… I might get a hug from Master Winter! Oh, I can't wait!'

Similarly — although, of course, in a different manner — the other members of the cohort experienced the bolstering effect of the Dying Wish, as well. All of them fought like devils, earning themselves a

fearsome reputation among the Irregulars.

And the man who had made it all possible…

Was currently cursing his fate.

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'Damn! Crap! Curse it all!'

Surrounded by a swarm of Nightmare Creatures, Sunny fought while feeling extremely aggrieved. Things were not going great for him… he was extremely tired, bruised and battered, and worst of all, his essence was running dry.

Keeping the shadow sword tangible was eating through what little he had left with frightening speed, but the worst offender was the Shadow Lantern. A Divine Memory was as gluttonous as one would think. On top of that, there were the Dying Wish and the Mantle of the Underworld.

Pretty soon, he would be completely spent.

Sadly, he could not dismiss the veil of shadows, since doing that would reveal his identity as Mongrel to a lot of strangers. The members of his own cohort had already seen enough, most likely, but he somewhat trusted them to keep his secret.

Due to the fact that Sunny had kept them alive through several dire battles, the bonds of loyalty were already forming between the six soldiers and their captain.

He had to dismiss something, though…

The first thing to go was the Dying Wish. Although it brought benefit to his soldiers — and, to a lesser degree, to all Irregulars — he simply could not allow the expenditure of essence that both the [Death Wish] and the [Underworld Armament] required.

The next Memory to go… was the Mantle of the Underworld itself. Sunny was reluctant and more than a little scared to continue his fight without a suit of armor, but there was little he could do.

Without sufficient essence to feed the [Living Stone], many cracks appeared on the stonelike onyx surface of the Mantle.

Not only had it lost some of its protective quality, but there was a risk that the ancient armor would receive too much damage and succumb entirely.

It was also growing heavy without the effects of the [Feather of Truth] enchantment.

He just had to fight carefully and concentrate on dodging the enemy attacks from now on. Even if he made a mistake or two, a couple wounds were not going to kill him. Thankfully, there were not as many enemies left around him as at the start of the battle.

Once the most damning evidence was gone, Sunny had no reason to keep the Shadow Lantern active, so he dismissed it as well.

With no enchantments to keep powered and the small amount of essence he received back by dismissing these Memories, he could maintain the shape of his sword for a bit longer.

Sunny killed a few more enemies, barely avoided a stream of acid that one of the monstrous insects spat, and retaliated by neatly severing its body in half.

'When is this going to end, damn it?'

A few seconds later, his odachi turned hazy, and then dissipated into a shadow. Sunny was at his limit.

'Please, gods, let it stop… let it stop… let it stop… argh, damnation, this is such crap! What the hell?! What kind of damned situation is this?!'

With nothing better to do, he grabbed a severed chitin blade of one of the abominations and used it as a makeshift sword.

At that moment, the veil of shadows created by the Shadow Lantern finally dissipated. The Irregulars saw a stunning image…

Wearing no armor and only clad in a torn black bodysuit, Captain

Sunless hammered a severed limb of an enemy into the carapace of a Fallen abomination. The white chitin split, and the creature let out a painful shriek. With indescribable fury and resentment burning in his eyes, the young Master bared his teeth and punched the beast with his naked fist, crushing its head.

The veteran soldiers shuddered.

'Such righteous wrath… Master Sunless must really hate Nightmare Creatures, huh?'

Sunny, meanwhile, kicked the Fallen Beast away and let out a trembling breath.

'Phew… that was close. How did I even survive that last attack?'

At that moment, something imperceptible changed on the battlefield.

The stone hive, which had been unified and deviously intelligent before, suddenly seemed to lose much of its coordination.

At the same time, the Spell suddenly whispered into Sunny's ear:

[You have slain a Corrupted Tyrant, Remnant of the Jade Queen.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have received a Memory.]

He blinked.

'...What?'

What had just happened?

It seemed… it seemed that the persistent corrosion, which the Cruel Sight had learned to reflect thanks to the Wormvine's miasma, turned out to be more powerful than Sunny had thought. Much more likely than that, though, was that it just happened to finish off the mighty abomination after it had been brought to the very edge of death by Sky Tide, but before she could deal the killing blow.

What were the chances of that? One in a million?

Standing above the dead Fallen Beast, Sunny grinned.

'I guess I'm lucky today…'

Chapter-868: Reputation

After the death of the Tyrant, the battle did not last long.

The stone hive had already lost many soldiers, as well as its most powerful champions. Without the guiding sentience of its ruler, the lesser creatures seemed to lack most of their intelligence and coordination. Feeling this weakness, the exhausted Irregulars advanced and slaughtered them without a hint of hesitation.

With Soul Reaper rampaging at the front of the formation, the number of the monstrous insects quickly dwindled. Then, Saint Tyris joined the battle and more or less wiped out the remaining abominations single-handedly.

Sky Tide seemed to have received several wounds in her fight with the Remnant of the Jade Queen, but it did not slow her much. Moving between the giant insects like wind, almost too swift to be seen with a naked eye, she disposed of all the remaining Nightmare Creatures in mere seconds. Her saber cut through their impregnable white carapaces as if they were made out of water.

Just like that, suddenly, silence settled over the summit of the mountain.

The soldiers looked at each other in confusion, struggling to believe that that bloody battle ended so abruptly. Then, when the sweet understanding dawned on them, the Irregulars lowered themselves to the ground with relieved sighs, drained of all strength.

Everyone was too exhausted to move and needed a few minutes to rest and collect their thoughts. Tired smiles appeared on their faces.

Sunny found a patch of rock that was not covered by fetid blue lymph and plopped on it, as well. He was utterly spent. As the excitement of the battle died down, his thoughts turned slow and

lazy.

'Ah, I'm hurt all over…'

He felt a pleasant satisfaction. Not only had they won a hard fight, but he also received a fair share of shadow fragments. Better yet, there was a Transcendent Memory of the Fifth Tier he was yet to take a look at…

For a moment, he wanted to summon the runes immediately, but then gave up on that idea. He was too tired to think properly right now. The Memory could wait until the cohort was safely back aboard the Rhino.

For now, Sunny was content to just sit on the ground and rest.

As he did, his shadows naturally took a look around.

The summit of the mountain had been transformed. The snow had melted or turned into blue sludge, the slope itself was littered with hundreds of dead Nightmare Creatures and deep cracks. The Gate still pulsed with darkness at the very peak, but one side of the deep schism it filled had collapsed and crumbled down.

Further down the slope, the massive carcass of the Jade Beetle lay on the cold stones. It seemed that the final stage of its battle with Saint Tyris had taken them away from the battlefield.

As a result, it was now pretty far from the stretch of the slope where Sunny had fought with the flanking force of the hive. Only corpses of Awakened and Fallen creatures remained. Some were cut apart, some were torn apart by the shadow tentacles, and many were utterly crushed by the fall of their ruler.

…Of course, the Irregulars did not know that, since that area had been covered by the veil of darkness summoned by the Shadow Lantern. To them, it all looked like Sunny's doing.

Their whispers entered his ears.

"Gods… look over there. Is that where Master Sunless fought?"

"So many dead bugs… wait, what the hell? Why are these corpses so mangled? It's like they were put through a meat grinder!"

"I mean, it does not even look like they were cut by a blade… it's more like he ripped them apart and crushed them with his bare hands."

"He did. Did you not see him, at the end? His weapon and armor must have been destroyed in the fight, so he just tore a leg off a Fallen abomination and then beat the bastard to death with it. And then… I swear to the gods, I saw it myself… he stood there and smiled, as though someone gave him the best present in the world!"

"I think he really hates Nightmare Creatures. His expression before that… so much anger, so much resentment. It looked, I don't know, personal? Maybe there's a tragic story there…"

"No wonder Soul Reaper went to the trouble of personally recruiting him."

"...What kind of devil is that kid?"

Sunny blinked.

Had he really smiled? Oh, that must have been the moment when he received the Transcendent Memory. He had indeed lost composure and grinned like an idiot for a few moments there…

In any case, none of these soldiers seemed to have connected him to Mongrel. They just thought that he was some kind of monster with a personal grudge against Nightmare Creatures. His own cohort, meanwhile…

Sunny turned slightly and caught sight of Luster, who was staring at him with an intense expression. The young man's eyes seemed extremely bitter, for some reason.

'What's up with that clown?'

At that moment, someone approached and sat down near him. Sunny turned around and saw Winter, who stared at him with a nonchalant expression.

"Wha…"

Before he could finish the thought, she suddenly grinned and pulled him into a very tight hug.

"You did great, Little Devil! Let's be friends…"

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Soon, the Irregulars caught their breaths and started moving. Saint Tyris departed after approaching Sunny to thank him for his contribution in slaying the Tyrant, her voice cordial and stern as usual. This time, however, it almost sounded… partial.

Since the threat of the stone hive had been eliminated, a signal was sent to the First Army that the path was clear. Not too long after that, a long column of vehicles appeared on the road that stretched far below, on the other side of the mountain. One of the divisions was proceeding with haste to its next destination.

The Irregulars themselves were busy with collecting soul shards from the slain abominations. A dozen heavy loaders arrived to drag the carcass of the Remnant of the Jade Queen away. Even in death, a Corrupted Tyrant was extremely valuable. Its impenetrable carapace and other parts had a lot of uses for advanced spelltech applications.

Sunny would not be surprised if some of the jade beetle ended up being used to bolster the defenses of one of the siege capitals, most likely Falcon Scott itself.

After some time, Master Jet left for the base camp where the APCs were parked in order to contact the Army Command. Since there was nothing for Sunny to do at the summit of the mountain, he followed her and climbed into the Rhino to rest.

There, sitting on his comfortable bed, Sunny finally summoned the runes.

'A Transcendent Memory… ah, let's see…'

Soon, his eyes gleamed.

Chapter-869: Sin of Solace

The runes shimmered in the air:

Memory: [Sin of Solace].

Memory Rank: Transcendent.

Memory Tier: V.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Looking at ethereal weave of symbols, Sunny felt a cold shiver running down his spine.

'A weapon…'

The [Sin of Solace] was the third Transcendent Memory he had received. However, it was of a higher tier than both the Undying Chain and the Dying Wish combined. More than that, it was a weapon… something that could express its power much more directly than an armor or a charm.

Something that he desperately needed here in the cold expanse of Antarctica.

A weapon bestowed by the slaying of a Corrupted Tyrant... had to be truly powerful.

Holding his breath, he continued to study the runes.

Memory Description: [This blade is a whisper of Ariel, the Demon of Dread, who turned a beautiful monster into a queen and gave her a sinister gift of forbidden knowledge.]

Sunny tilted his head, suddenly excited.

'The Demon of Dread… another daemon? There are five of them I know of now!'

Demon of Fate, Demon of Hope, Demon of Choice, Demon of Dread…

'Wait, who was the fifth one?'

He strained his memory for a while, and then scratched the back of his head.

'Oh, right. The Demon of Oblivion. How did I forget?'

Sunny pondered about the fact that the Demon of Oblivion was so forgettable for a bit. Then, he slightly shook his head.

In any case, if this Memory was connected to a daemon, it had to be immensely powerful.

His heart started to beat faster.

Memory Enchantments: [Sinister Whisper], [Perfect Jade], [Omen of Dread], [Hideous Truth], [Cursed].

Sunny blinked.

'Wait... what? Cursed?'

What did that mean, cursed?!

Somewhat disturbed, he decided to read the description of the last enchantment first. Soon, an ugly expression appeared on his face.

[Cursed] Enchantment Description: "This blade slowly drives its wielder mad."

'What the hell?!'

His new shiny Transcendent weapon… had come with side effects?

'What kind of crap is this?! Since when do Memories have Flaws? Mad… it wants to drive me mad? We'll see who goes mad first, damn it…'

Glancing at the runes with resentment, Sunny decided to study the other enchantments before coming to conclusions.

[Sinister Whisper] Enchantment Description: "This blade can deal both physical damage and mental damage to those that it cuts, destroying not only their bodies, but also their minds. The mental damage persists like a curse, even after a single cut."

He grunted.

'How insidious…'

Mental attacks were almost as rare as soul attacks, and equally as hard to defend against. There was something terrifying about them, too, especially to those beings that were very hard to kill or nearly immortal.

After all, what was the point of living if one's sanity was gone? A blade like that… truly, it would have been a bane of someone like the eternal Chain Lords of the Kingdom of Hope.

...If only the damned Memory did not deal the same mental damage to the wielder!

Sunny grimaced, and then continued to read the runes.

[Perfect Jade] Enchantment Description: "This blade is carved from a piece of sublime jade, and as such is sharp and durable beyond logic and reason."

'Straightforward…'

[Omen of Dread] Enchantment Description: "A faint remnant of Ariel's presence lingers on this blade, striking terror into the hearts of all beings."

Sunny frowned.

'Another mental attack enchantment, but this one is passive and affects an area. Not bad… should work wonders when Nightmare is around, too…'

Finally, the last one made him frown.

[Hideous Truth] Enchantment Description: "The more the wielder's sanity is shattered, the more powerful this blade becomes. It bestows revelations of madness on those who give in to its will."

Sunny sighed.

'Damnation…'

So, basically, this already formidable weapon could grow many times more terrifying, but only if the person wielding it went completely insane. Conveniently, the Sin of Solace also drove anyone who wielded it to madness, thus providing an easy solution to unlocking the potential of the [Hideous Truth].

'What am I supposed to do with this thing? And what does that mean, give in to its will? Does this cursed sword have a will of its own?'

While Sunny liked to joke that he was a bit crazy, he did not really want to turn into a raving lunatic.

He lingered for a few minutes, then took a deep breath and summoned his new Memory into existence.

Soon, a beautiful shuangshou jian appeared in his hands. It was a straight, thin double-edged greatsword with a narrow guard and a graceful blade that gradually tapered to a sharp tip. Despite the fact that it was almost as long as Sunny was tall, the Sin of Solace surprisingly did not weigh much… in fact, it was as light as a feather.

Its hilt was carved out of black obsidian, and the blade itself was stark white, with beautiful patterns etched on it. Despite the description of the [Perfect Jade] enchantment, it did not seem rigid as stone… instead, it was both hard and flexible in perfect proportion.

A sword such as this was nimble and swift, but also capable of dealing devastating damage.

Despite its breathtaking beauty, however…

As soon as Sunny touched the cool obsidian hilt, it was as though someone whispered into his ear. He shivered and turned around, only to find that there was nothing behind him.

The whisper, however, did not disappear. It continued to flow from somewhere just out of reach, too quiet to discern any words… for now. Sunny felt that if he just concentrated hard enough, he would be able to understand what the rustling voice was saying.

And it was important… very important… to understand it.

There was a meaning to them that he just had to know...

Had to...

Before Sunny noticed, his body was covered in cold sweat. He stared at the Sin of Solace with a complicated expression, and then summoned the Undying Chain.

As soon as the bleak armor wrapped itself around his body, the insidious whisper seemed to grow weaker. Sunny was only slightly obsessed with listening to it now.

'Ah… good.'

The [Chains of Longing] enchantment of the Transcendent armor provided him with a high protection against mind attacks, and the [Cursed] attribute of the beautiful jian seemed to be just that… a strange and sinister mind attack aimed at the sword's own wielder.

Which meant that Saint, who was completely immune to mind attacks, would be able to use the jade sword without any problem. Sunny was sufficiently certain what he would be able to withstand the tantalizing whispers if need be, as well.

It was a small price to pay for being able to wield such a frightening Transcendent weapon.

'If push comes to shove, I can afford to lose a bit of sanity, too. I mean, what's wrong with going a little mad? Been there, done that…'

Chapter-870: To Do List

Dismissing the beautiful sword, Sunny breathed a sigh of relief. The insidious whispers assaulting his mind disappeared, leaving only a lingering sense of chill and unease behind.

The pressure of the Call was already enough to drive a person insane. Adding the curse of the Sin of Solace to this burden was not for the weak of heart.

'Well, whatever. I'll just let Saint use it for now.'

He was impressed by the cursed blade, though. Its fundamental properties were already fearsome enough, considering that this Transcendent weapon's sharpness and durability were further enhanced by the [Perfect Jade] enchantment. It also synergizes well with Nightmare's [Dreadlord] Attribute and the [Mantle of Fear] Ability.

What made it so alluring to Sunny was the mental damage it dealt, though. Mind attacks… were an insidious thing. While not as obviously destructive as more straightforward elemental damage types and not as universally deadly and hard to defend against as soul attacks, they possessed one frightening quality.

The more sentience a being possessed, the more that being stood to be damaged by a mind attack.

What it meant was that while lesser Nightmare Creatures — Beasts and Monsters — would not be as susceptible to the [Sinister Whisper], the truly dangerous foes — Demons, Devils, Tyrants, Terrors… and humans — would suffer terribly from it.

And since those were the enemies Sunny was wary of the most, the Sin of Solace was a perfect tool to satisfy his needs.

'I just have to be careful not to suffer terribly myself.'

But even if he did… at least he would be reaping the benefits of the [Hideous Truth]. Sunny felt that the cursed sword would become truly terrifying if its wielder managed to unlock that strange enchantment. At its full force… maybe the Sin of Solace would be powerful enough to strike down even Great Nightmare Creatures.

Or Supreme humans...

With a wistful sigh, Sunny decided to check his progress in other areas, since he already had the runes summoned.

Shadow Fragments: [870/4000].

Not bad… after being stuck at [744/4000] for half a year, he had gained more than a hundred fragments in just two days. If this continued, Sunny would become a Tyrant in a not so distant future.

Of course, if he continued to fight at that intensity every day, he would also probably be dead by then.

Somewhat reassured, he shifted his gaze to the Mantle of the Underworld.

Vanquished Foes: [4555/6000].

The monumental task of satisfying the requirement of the [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment was nearing its final stage. With how many Nightmare Creatures ran rampant in Antarctica, Sunny would certainly be able to complete it soon. Now that his identity as Mongrel was, most likely, known to the members of his cohort, there should be no problem wearing the Mantle more often.

He still did not know how the onyx armor would grow after the limit was reached, but hoped to see something incredible.

Then, Sunny concentrated on his Shadows, starting with Saint.

Shadow Fragments: [101/200].

Saint was already halfway to becoming a… Saint. Or a Transcendent

Demon, to be more precise. He could not even imagine how powerful she would be once he collected enough Memories — or Echoes — to feed to his loyal knight.

Still, a hundred or so Ascended Memories was not a small amount. Luckily, he could also use Memories of lesser Ranks, although the process would be much slower in that case.

Finally, he read the runes describing Nightmare.

Shadow Fragments: [14/300].

He sighed. To be honest, Sunny had not been very diligent about feeding his steed. For some reason, the black courser required much more fragments to Ascend than Saint had needed… maybe because he was already a Terror, or maybe because Saint had come from a race created by Nether, the Prince of the Underworld.

In any case, Sunny felt that helping her become Transcendent was more important than elevating Nightmare to an Ascended Terror. Especially considering that his Terror Ability, [Dream Curse], was still locked.

And speaking about that Ability… at least there had been more progress on that front.

Nightmares required: [112/1000].

His steed had already subjugated more than a hundred nightmares, both making himself stronger and growing closer to unlocking the [Dream Curse]. Of course, that task was still far from being over… but Sunny had a feeling that there would be a lot of progress soon.

Antarctica was in the throes of a cataclysm that had become known as the Chain of Nightmares, after all. It was bound to breed a lot of them. Better yet, up until now, the black steed had been limited to only subjugating nightmares of Masters — simply because Awakened humans did not dream.

Awakened Nightmare Creatures did, however. Which meant that Nightmare would be able to plant seeds of fear into their souls, and then visit the dreams of those abominations that had survived the

encounter to harvest them.

'Maybe I should let him loose more often.'

And that was that, more or less. His own shadow fragments, that of Saint and Nightmare, the [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment, and the [Dream Curse]. These were the things he needed to concentrate on.

Then, there were other things — his arsenal of Memories, the power of his cohort, and the equipment of its members.

Oh, and he also had to survive, somehow.

'I probably will.'

Sunny had made a lot of progress, but there was a lot more progress still to be made.

Luckily, Antarctica was just the place to make it. It had an inexhaustible reserve of Nightmare Creatures of all kinds, with numerous new ones soon to arrive. As long as one could stay alive, there were countless opportunities for growth.

Master Jet had been right. This campaign was going to shift the balance of power across all of humanity… many new champions would emerge, many renowned warriors would become even stronger. Many would die.

Thinking about that, Sunny suddenly felt somber. Now, he was even more convinced that the great clans would not be able to stay away from the Chain of Nightmares for long.

He just had to make the best of it before they arrived, then.

Chapter-871: Wild Imaginations

"...A thousand duels, undefeated! He even went against Morgan of Valor before Ascending!"

"No way…"

"What do you mean, no way? The recordings are all over the network, dude!"

"No, Luster is right. I don't know much about the Dreamscape, but it is a fact that he contained a manifesting Gate as an Awakened. Alone."

"I also heard that he is a bastard son of a Saint from the House of Night… maybe even of Nightwalker himself…"

"Actually, some say that he was created in a secret government laboratory from the DNA of powerful Nightmare Creatures. But the research was abandoned, with all records destroyed, because he was the only test subject who did not go completely mad."

"...I've heard that he is a woman, though?"

"Does he look like a woman, you idiot?"

"Well… now that you say it… he is strangely petite. Has anyone seen Captain undressed?"

"Belle. Did you get hit in the head during the last battle?!"

"Keep your voices down! You'll wake him up!"

…Already awake, Sunny was laying on his comfortable bed and listening to his subordinates gossip at the front of the steadily moving Rhino. His expression was… hard to describe.

'These fools…'

He had expected that much from Luster… but Kimmy? Not to mention Belle. Belle was supposed to be their reasonable senior, damn it!

With a sigh, Sunny rose, threw a neutral glance at the suddenly quiet trio, and then went to the kitchen to make some coffee. He poured himself a cup of the fragrant drink, added some synthetic sugar to it, then sat down in the lounge area of the APC and took a delighted sip.

Throughout all of it, three pairs of eyes were following his every move. Sunny shifted slightly, then looked at them in return.

"What? Is there something on my suit?"

His black bodysuit had already repaired the tears it received in the battle against the stone hive. Its smart fabric was truly something else… the more Sunny wore it, the more he understood how well-designed this unusual uniform was. One could argue whether it was dapper or not, but overall, he was extremely satisfied with his new equipment.

Hearing his question, Kim and Luster suddenly looked away with furtive expressions.

"No, no. It's nothing. Uh… you look great today, Captain!"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

Belle, meanwhile, continued to stare at him with a strange expression. For some reason, Sunny suddenly felt an impulse to cover his chest with an arm. He frowned.

"Anything you want to ask?"

The swordsman simply nodded and smiled.

"Yeah… Captain, are you Mongrel?"

Luster and Kim flinched and looked at him with horror. Sunny, meanwhile, scowled.

"...Who are you calling a mongrel, bastard?"

Belle shook his head.

"No, I mean… are you Lord Mongrel? You know, that guy?"

'Damn. As expected…'

Truth be told, the moment the question had been asked, he had no choice but to answer. Sunny just stalled a little to collect his thoughts.

He shrugged.

"Oh. Yeah, that's me."

Then, Sunny took a sip of his coffee with an absolutely nonchalant expression. Luster and Kimmy, meanwhile, were staring at him in shock. Their eyes were as wide as saucers.

For a few long moments, there was nothing but dead silence. Sunny enjoyed his drink for a bit, and then scratched the back of his head.

"Ah… but don't tell anyone. It's a secret. I wasn't really supposed to become known to the public… you know?"

Their expressions slowly changed. A hint of grave understanding appeared in their eyes. The three looked at each other, and then Kim resolutely nodded.

"Of course, Captain! We will keep silent about… about who you really are. We'll tell Samara, Quentin, and Dorn, too. Don't worry!"

Sunny nodded with satisfaction.

'Isn't it great, to have such understanding minions?'

Of course, he had no idea what it was that they thought they understood. But that was the beauty of it… he did not need to. The best and most convincing lies were those that people built in their heads themselves.

Human imagination was a wild thing… whatever idiotic theory his soldiers decided to believe, be it that their Captain was a secret love child of a famous Saint or a product of a forbidden government experiment, it was all good with him.

The point was that they would keep it to themselves.

Just like that, a few more people learned that he was Mongrel. Sunny felt a bit sad about that fact.

On the bright side, it seemed that he would have no problem summoning the Mantle of the Underworld in the future, at least now when the cohort acted independently of other human forces. Luster, too, was looking at him with a newfound reverence.

If there was one inconvenient thing about the revelation that Captain Sunless was, in fact, the famous Lord Mongrel… it was that Belle kept throwing strange glances at Sunny.

'What... the hell...'

With a friendly smile, Sunny took his cup of coffee and returned to the back of the Rhino. Climbing back onto the bed, he then took out his communicator.

There, a new message was waiting for him.

As his smile grew a little wider, Sunny concentrated on the lines of text.

"Rain: Hey, Sunny! How are you doing? Everyone is talking about the Southern Quadrant campaign… that is where you went, right? Are you an officer now? Tell me so that I could brag about it in school. One of my classmate's sister is apparently an ace MWP pilot.

She won't shut up… uh… stop talking about it. Anyway, are you doing well? The news says that everything is going great, but my dad seems very stressed. I don't think I've ever seen him so tense. Oh, I am doing well, myself. A few kids in my class stopped coming to school, so… I guess they are at the Awakened Academy now.

But I am not showing any symptoms, yet. I am practicing my archery

and swordsmanship every day, though. You'll be proud of your pupil!"

Sunny reread the message a few times, then finished his coffee, grinned, and started composing a response:

"Sunny: Hey. An officer? Gods, who do you think I am… of course I am! Let me tell you, I am a captain of the most elite unit in the whole army. I have a bunch of powerful Awakened under me, and a reputation so fearsome that other Masters want to be my friends. The Devil of Antarctica, that's what they call me… well, I'm sure someone does… maybe.

Just yesterday, an actual Saint personally expressed gratitude to me. I will probably get a medal soon, too. Oh, I am also in charge of a cutting-edge armored personnel carrier called the Rhino. You won't believe how amazing it is. Let me describe it! First of all..."

Chapter-872: Spreading Nightmares

The initial several weeks of the Antarctica campaign were the most intense... at least for now. The divisions of the First Army steadily moved south, fighting through the swiftly growing swarms of Nightmare Creatures and establishing strategic encampments along the way. These encampments were going to serve as the transit points of the evacuation networks soon.

Moving through them, all the population of the Antarctic Center was going to be relocated to the siege capitals to await eventual salvation. The same thing, only on a much larger scale, was happening in East Antarctica, where most people of the Southern Quadrant lived.

As days went by, the Chain of Nightmares grew more rampant. New Gates manifested with increased frequency, disgorging more and more abominations into the waking world. Luckily, the burden pressing down on the First Army also grew lighter, since more and more divisions reached their destinations and entrenched themselves inside the cities that would become humanity's strongholds in the coming months.

Without the need to brave the enemy-infested wilderness, the lives of the soldiers became less perilous. That was not to say that they were not terribly busy — turning a populous city into a wartime fortress was a laborious task, too.

However, no one was as busy as the First Irregular Company.

Just like Master Jet had promised, the Irregulars almost never rested. While other soldiers had specific tasks that sometimes forced them into battle with the Nightmare Creatures, and sometimes did not, the seven cohorts of Irregulars constantly moved between various flashpoints to douse their flames.

Day after day, battle after battle… soon, the novelty of Antarctica's sobering reality dissipated, and the endless procession of combat engagements blurred into one continuous, bloody ordeal.

They were doing their job, still.

Not all battles were as large-scale or as dire as those in the first two days of the active operation. Some demanded more precision than all-out effort, others simply had to be fought because no one else could be spared to address the situation.

Tempered in this terrible crucible, Sunny and his cohort were becoming accustomed to the trials of the Chain of Nightmares, as well as each other. Their ability to fight as a single cohesive entity increased, finally reaching a satisfactory level. Their personal power grew, too.

Sunny was not the only one who had managed to enhance his arsenal of Memories, for one. With so many Nightmare Creatures that needed to be slaughtered, each member of the cohort acquired new combat tools.

Quentin, for example, had received a beautiful suit of plate armor for killing a Fallen officer of the stone hive. Just like the carapaces of the monstrous insects, it was pure white and incredibly durable. Luster managed to acquire a charm that was supposed to increase his luck, even if no one could really tell whether it actually worked or not.

Samara was now wearing a chameleon cape that blended into the environment and masked her position.

Others were using new Memories, too.

Armed with them, the cohort managed to survive these perilous weeks without suffering any casualties. They swiftly racked up kills and contribution points, as well as soul shards and reputation among the soldiers of the First Army.

...However, their fearsome reputation paled in comparison to that of Mongrel, who was slowly turning into somewhat of an urban myth.

Sunny had had no plans of unleashing his weird alter ego again so

soon, but the circumstances forced him to make a different decision. There was just too much for him to do. Often, several missions of utmost importance appeared simultaneously, and since he could not be in two places at the same time… he sent Nightmare and Saint to take care of the easier ones instead.

This approach turned out to be surprisingly effective. Armed with the Sin of Solace, which synergized extremely well with both of them, his Shadows had become a real menace on the battlefield. They were also able to traverse the mountainous terrain of the Antarctic Center with great speed, allowing Sunny to dispatch them to complete missions that required speed above all else.

Of course, these missions had to be on the lower spectrum of hardship. A Transcendent weapon or not, Saint and Nightmare could not compare to the power of the cohort itself, especially since he led it personally.

So while Sunny and his soldiers dealt with the most dangerous tasks, Mongrel popped up here and there without any discernible pattern, appearing from nowhere and disappearing without a trace after dealing devastating damage to the Nightmare Creatures and leaving only severed corpses behind.

Suffice it to say, Saint's popularity among the rank and file of the First Army grew explosively. The Guardian Angel of Antarctica… that title, coined by a random network journalist, was spoken by them more and more often, jokingly at first, but then a bit less so.

Sunny, meanwhile, finally earned his own nickname. Unsurprisingly, he was being called Devil now… or, infuriatingly, Little Devil! The latter one, however, was only used by the other captains of the Irregulars. No one else dared to speak it to his face — or behind his back, really, considering that the rumor that the young Master was always watching and listening quickly spread through the army.

…Of course, not everything went well for the human force.

The First Army experienced several painful setbacks. More soldiers fell, and more were critically wounded. The technical equipment was starting to grow less and less reliable as time went by, even if the

most critical pieces worked as intended due to expensive spelltech countermeasures.

It was getting harder and harder for the Awakened to find a safe place to sleep without being whisked away by the Call.

Worst of all, however, was the effect that the Chain of Nightmares exerted on mundane humans.

Nephis had once told Sunny that each person infected by the Spell carried a small Seed of Nightmare in their soul… and that those of them who failed to pass the first trial became a Category One Gate themselves.

The Chain of Nightmares increased the rate of Gate manifestations manifold, and that rate, terribly, spread to mundane humans as well. Not only was there an anomalously high amount of young people falling prey to the Spell in Antarctica, but also — for the first time in half a century — people outside the usual age of infestation started to succumb to the First Nightmares en masse, as well.

Which meant that, just like during the emergence of the First Generation, no one was safe. Anyone could become infected, fail the trial of the Spell, and turn into a murderous Nightmare Creature. The people locked inside the siege capitals, those being relocated through the evacuation corridors… even the soldiers themselves.

A tense and fearful atmosphere slowly settled over Antarctica.

Chapter-873: And Full of Terrors

Chilling darkness veiled Antarctica like a burial shroud. The twilight of the dusk had finally succumbed to the inevitable advent of the cruelly lasting absence of light, and the long night had come to the Southern Quadrant, pregnant with countless horrors.

This night was going to last for many months, and by the end of it… who knew if any of the humans it embraced would still be alive? How many of them would be lucky enough to see the light of day again?

…Sunny had never experienced a night quite like that.

The sun was gone, and the empty sky was full of brilliant stars. The pale visage of the moon lingered among them from time to time, coming and going as it pleased. Despite how dark and cold the world had become, it was strangely beautiful.

Back in the alloy jungle of the Northern Quadrant Siege Capital, stars were rare guests. Light pollution kept them away. Similarly, there were no stars shining upon the cursed expanse of the Forgotten Shore…

Antarctica was different. Despite the coming of the night, it only grew more dazzling. The stars, the moon, and the breathtaking tapestry of the Aurora Australis that shimmered above them as ethereal shades of green, blue, purple, and red flowed into each other… all of it was very beautiful.

However, that beauty hid oppressive horror.

'Dread… that's the word to describe it. This is a land of dread.'

Sunny and his cohort were walking through the encampment of the First Evacuation army, their armor covered in dents and painted by

the blood of the Nightmare Creatures they had recently killed. The tense and tired soldiers hurried to get out of their way, throwing intense looks at the Irregulars.

"Look, it's the Devils! They're here."

"Thank the gods…"

Recently, they had become a comforting sight for the rank and file of the First Army. Wherever Irregulars appeared, problems seemed to disappear and the number of casualties drastically fell. Of course, these victories had a cost. It's just that the soldiers weren't the ones paying it.

With a grim expression on his face, Sunny glanced at Dorn, who was limping and seemed barely able to walk. The giant man's face was pale and covered in cold sweat. He had received a severe wound in the last battle… even with Quentin's help, Dorn was going to be out of commission for at least several days. Which meant that they would be short a man should a new mission arrive.

The campaign was still on track, but it was getting more dire with each day. The air in the encampment was full of fear and tension. More and more Nightmare Creatures poured into the waking world, and now that darkness reigned Antarctica unopposed, any area that was not illuminated by powerful spotlights could be hiding a deadly threat.

Even then, the spotlights tended to flicker and break down spontaneously, which made even artificial light unreliable. People were constantly on edge and afraid of every shadow. After all, most couldn't see through them like Sunny.

Even worse, danger lurked not only in the darkness outside, but also inside the fortified encampments. The Spell was spreading through the ranks of mundane humans like a plague, and anyone could turn into a rampaging monster if left alone for too long.

There was no real safety anywhere.

'If things are like that after just one month, how are we going to last

the whole year?'

Shaking his head, Sunny looked ahead and caught a glimpse of the Rhino. His eyelids suddenly grew heavy… he really needed rest.

Despite the glum atmosphere in the camp, objectively, things were going reasonably well for the field army dispatched to the Antarctic Center. It had already advanced almost all the way to the southern edge of the narrow landmass.

All but one division — the one Sunny and his cohort were assigned to — had already reached their destinations and were in the process of converting them into siege capitals.

Evacuation networks had been established, with fortified transit outposts placed near the strategic points. Constant patrols maintained protected corridors for the armored convoys to ferry the civilians from smaller settlements into the handful of human strongholds. Up north, the relocation was already in full swing.

Here in the south, however, it was only starting… still, the first phase of the operation was well on its way.

'Maybe we'll get to relax behind a thick wall of a siege capital soon, too.'

Climbing into the Rhino, Sunny glanced at Kim.

"Status?"

She studied her military communicator.

"Army Command designated this camp as a green zone. Last check was thirteen minutes ago."

He nodded. A green zone was one with no Gates close enough to affect the Dream Realm anchors of the Awakened. People could sleep safely within its confines.

"Okay. Quentin, tend to Dorn. Kimmy, Luster, Samara, and Belle — enjoy the first sleep shift. I'll stand watch until you guys return."

They nodded and soon disappeared inside the sleeping pods. Quentin got busy dealing with Dorn's injury, using both his Aspect and an extensive medkit. Sunny, meanwhile, walked over to the command and communication suite and sat behind a console.

He lingered for a moment, and then summoned his runes.

Shadow Fragments: [1332/4000].

Shadow Fragments: [133/200].

Nightmares required: [209/1000].

And finally:

Vanquished Foes: [5523/6000].

He had achieved a lot in the past month. So much, in fact, that exhaustion had seeped into his very bones. Sunny had long lost count of how many Nightmare Creatures he had slain, but it had to be a couple of thousands, at least. Even more if he counted those that Saint and Nightmare had hunted down.

'Mantle of the Underworld will probably be first.'

Even though he could not wear the onyx armor in every battle, its counter was swiftly approaching the limit.

Sunny sighed, and then dismissed the runes. Almost simultaneously, the symbol of an incoming communication appeared on the console's screen.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

'Looks like a new mission is here, after all…'

Chapter-874: One Last Mission

A moment later, a familiar face appeared on the screen. Despite the pressure of leading the First Irregular Company into the meat grinder of the Southern Quadrant campaign, Master Jet looked relaxed and at ease. Like she always did…

No, actually, she almost seemed to look better than how she had back in the safe haven of the NQSC. It was as though the exhaustion that everyone in Antarctica felt could not touch her. The perpetual dark circles under her eyes were gone, and her whole presence appeared strangely invigorated.

…Sunny had a suspicion of why.

Soul Reaper flashed him a bright smile.

"Hey, Sunny. How is it going?"

He simply nodded.

"We cleared that Fallen nest. Dorn was wounded, though. He'll need a few days to recover."

In the past month, his relationship with Master Jet had gradually changed. They grew a bit closer and more familiar with each other. That sense of camaraderie could only be forged by fighting side by side in numerous battles, and was only enhanced by the exceedingly rare background they shared.

Wasn't it funny, to see two outskirt rats leading the elite government Awakened into battle?

However, at the same time… after observing Soul Reaper in combat more, Sunny felt that he had come to understand the nature of her Flaw. And it was a grim one, for sure.

A long time ago… in a different lifetime, almost… before even the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had heard from Teacher Julius that Master Jet was feared by many Awakened. As the old man had put it, her problematic personality destroyed any chance she might have had of ever becoming a Saint. Actually, the exact words he had used were…

Who would want to help a psychopathic killer become a Saint?

Later, Sunny had learned more about the unspoken rules of the Awakened society and came to believe that these rumors were just a pretense to justify the suppression of the Sovereigns. A product of the contempt proud Legacies felt toward a clanless nobody from the outskirts who dared to become stronger than them, and refused to bend the knee to their power.

But now… he was not so sure.

Sunny had seen that Jet possessed a bizarre ability to absorb the soul essence of those that she killed. He had also witnessed her powerful, but fractured core that constantly leaked essence like a broken vessel. Later, he also observed that she seemed to lack the ability to naturally regenerate essence, as all Awakened could.

And so, he now suspected that Soul Reaper's Flaw forced her to constantly pursue murder. It seemed that killing was the only way for her to prevent her fractured core from becoming lifeless and empty.

That would actually explain a lot of things, from the true reason she had chosen to come to Antarctica to why a girl from the outskirts — someone who had never been treated like a human by the government — would decide to become a dedicated government operative.

Working for the authorities might not have been the most glamorous job, but if there was one thing it did not lack, it was an endless amount of targets that had to be killed.

So… maybe those who treated Soul Reaper Jet like a person obsessed with killing were not wrong. They were just mistaken about the reason for her morbid obsession.

Which posed a question… could he really trust her? What would happen if Soul Reaper's essence was running low, and Sunny was the only one around?

If he was correct in his suspicion, of course.

…While Sunny was thinking about that, Master Jet grinned and waved her hand in front of the camera. In it was a strange charm… no, actually, it was just a mundane… piece of jewelry? The thing looked like a golden circle with four stars engraved on it, beautiful filigree surrounding them, and a purple ribbon attached to the top.

'What the hell is that?'

Noticing his confusion, she shook her head.

"Gods, Sunny. Don't you know what that thing is? This is the Transcendent Star of Valor! The highest military decoration one can receive. It's your medal, fool. I finally managed to get the Army Command to issue it."

Sunny blinked.

"Oh. That's… great."

Master Jet let out an exasperated sigh.

"...It comes with a very sizable contribution point reward, too."

Instantly, his expression livened.

"Oh! That's great!"

Finally satisfied, Soul Reaper nodded.

"It took some convincing to make happen. Anyway, I'll hold on to it until we meet in person. About that… plans changed a little, so you'll have to complete one more mission before that happens. Ah, but don't worry. This one is a calm one, so your man will have plenty of time to recover."

Sunny stared at her with a dubious expression. Master Jet summoned

the map of the Antarctic Center and highlighted several points on it.

"The division you're with is not going to proceed further south, since there are no big population centers there. However, there is a very important research installation at the southernmost point of the landmass. It's about four hundred kilometers away from your current position."

Sunny studied the map. The Antarctic Center resembled a gargantuan snake that sprawled across the ocean, and the installation Jet mentioned was situated at the very tip of its tail.

"What about it?"

She shrugged.

"Your mission is to reach the installation, secure the VIP currently residing there, and bring him back to the nearest siege capital. There is a garrison of local Awakened commanded by a Master at the installation, too. They will be responsible for evacuating the regular staff and scientists.

You can choose to go back on your own, but… that would be a jerk move, considering that they are expecting reinforcements to help them make the journey."

Sunny thought for a bit, then nodded.

"Sounds easy."

'...Yeah, no way. Something bad is definitely going to happen.'

Master Jet smiled.

"It does, doesn't it? In any case, after that is done, we will probably remain within the walls of siege capitals for a long time, and finally have time to rest. Good luck!"

Chapter-875: Old Roads

The next day, Sunny and his cohort separated from the battered division. The mass of vehicles and soldiers marched down the broad highway, heading to a large city that was situated behind the mountain peaks to the east. The Rhino, meanwhile, continued south.

"Four hundred kilometers… how long do you think it will take us to reach the research installation?"

Sunny was currently in the cabin of the APC, leaning on a bulkhead as he looked ahead. Luster glanced at him from the pilot's seat and shrugged hesitantly.

"Hard to say, sir. The terrain here is really rough, and we'll need to climb over many mountains before reaching the coastal plain. There are some old roads here and there, with tunnels that can serve as convenient shortcuts. But since no one took care of them for half a century, it's mostly a stone labyrinth. So… several days at the least.

Maybe even a week if we want to be really careful and lower the risk of stumbling into a horde of Nightmare Creatures."

He hesitated for a few moments, and then added:

"Of course, I can get us there in a day if we leave the mountains and drive along the coastal thoroughfare."

Since most of the Antarctic Center was mountainous in nature, moving across its expanse with speed was somewhat of a problem. It would have been much faster by air, but no one was suicidal enough to use an aircraft in these circumstances.

The reason was very simple… it was impossible to load enough armor on a flying vehicle. Not only would its electronics and navigation be swiftly fried by the interference of the Gates, but even

worse than that, countless Nightmare Creatures in a hundred-kilometer radius would be able to see and take the aircraft down.

Since very few Awakened could fight effectively in the air, being swarmed by winged abominations or taken down by a hail of ranged attacks from the ground was their worst nightmare.

Still, that did not mean that there were no means of traversing the Antarctic Center quickly. Since the terrain was much more flat near the coast, there was a convenient highway running along the shore of the cold ocean. It's just that traveling by it was not exactly safe, especially these days.

The ocean, too, was overflowing with Nightmare Creatures. All kinds of horrors hid beneath its restless surface.

Sunny sighed.

"...No, let's not go anywhere near the coast. Avoid those old tunnels, too. Just take your time and take us over the mountains, Luster. Dorn needs time to recover, anyway."

The young man smiled.

"Yes, sir! Will do, sir!"

Sunny gave him a bleak look and shook his head. Ever since the revelation of his identity as Mongrel, Luster had been acting as an overly enthusiastic sycophant. It was honestly a bit bothersome.

"Well… alright then…"

He walked back to the back of the Rhino and sat down to meditate. In the past month, the importance of replenishing one's essence had become painfully clear to all Awakened in Antarctica. There were just too many Nightmares Creatures around and too many battles that had to be fought… maintaining one's reserves was often the difference between life and death.

It was also an inescapable restriction that defined how often and how well one could fight.

Sunny's essence capacity was roughly four times as vast as that of almost any other Master, but the rate at which his soul restored it was only twice as fast. As a result, he needed three to four days to fully replenish it. Sleep, rest, and meditation helped… but who had time to rest in Antarctica?

All of them had to get accustomed to fighting while suffering from a dire deficit of essence. That was another reason why the campaign grew harder as days went by, and why everyone was exhausted. His cohort was in a much better spot than most thanks to Luster, but Sunny himself had not been able to make use of the young man's extraordinary Aspect.

…Luckily, they were not supposed to fight any serious battles in the next few days. That was already a blessing.

Keeping his eyes closed, Sunny rested as his shadows scouted the route ahead.

The Rhino climbed the steep slopes of the mountain chain with agility that was surprising for a machine of that size. The Aurora Australis shimmered with ethereal lights in the black sky above it, but the mountains themselves were shrouded in darkness.

Driving a heavy APC up and down the treacherous slopes at night was not for the faint of heart, since one small mistake could send it plummeting down from a deadly height. Still, Luster seemed to be doing fine. He even had his lucky charm summoned, rubbing it from time to time with a nervous look.

Everything seemed calm.

Slowly but surely, they were moving toward their destination. Sunny made an effort to memorize as much of the landscape as he could, knowing that they might be coming back the same way after picking up the VIP at the research installation. The southern edge of the Transantarctic Mountains was, indeed, a real labyrinth.

Tall peaks rose into the sky, with remnants of broken roads clinging to their slopes. Dark maws of tunnels that had been burrowed through the mass of stone appeared from time to time, filling him

with a sense of alarm.

The roads, as well as the tunnels, had been constructed long before he was born, during the Dark Times. Back then, humanity had been busy destroying itself in a series of devastating wars as the world fell apart around it. Then, the Nightmare Spell came, and many things changed. The old roads were now abandoned and in a state of disrepair, but the Rhino could still make use of them.

The progress was slow, however, and it was only made slower by the need to avoid active Gates and prowling swarms of Nightmare Creatures.

In the end, it took them almost four days to traverse the mountains and descend to the coastal plain at the southern edge of the Antarctic Center. From here, they could proceed to the destination at full speed. As the Rhino accelerated and flew across the plain, a powerful blizzard enveloped it, reducing the visibility almost to zero.

…That was when things started to go wrong.

Chapter-876: LO49

Sunny woke up with a start. The familiar sounds and vibrations of the Rhino told him that everything was okay, and that the vehicle was moving at high speed toward its destination. No one seemed to be attacking them…

And yet, for some reason, he felt a sense of deep unease. Sunny frowned and rose from his bed, then went over to the pilot's cabin. On his way, he passed Kim, who was running diagnostics on the secondary control panel, and Samara, who was tinkering with her rifle on the workstation in the cargo bay.

Reaching the front of the Rhino, Sunny silently looked through the armored windshield at the white wall of the blizzard that enveloped the world. Of course, he could have just accessed the feeds of external cameras from the command suite, but he trusted his own eyes much more.

…Nothing seemed out of place.

He hesitated for a few moments, then spoke to Luster:

"Did something happen just now?"

The young man glanced at him in confusion.

"Uh… no? Oh, there was a tiny spike of seismic activity a few minutes ago, but that's nothing unusual. Happens all the time. Don't worry, sir… we'll reach the installation in about half an hour."

Sunny scowled.

"...Good."

He returned to the lounge area, poured himself a cup of coffee, and

then walked over to the command suite.

"Kimmy, contact the research facility. Tell them we'll be arriving soon."

She paused the diagnostic software, activated the transmitter and sent a communication request to the installation they were approaching. For a few minutes, there was only static on the channel. Kim frowned, then repeated the call, this time extending the antennae of the Rhino to their full length.

Still, nothing.

Sunny took a sip of coffee.

"What, no one's responding?"

She studied the monitors, then said in a tentative tone:

"No, it's not that… it's just… uh, our signal doesn't seem to be coming through for some reason."

He scratched the back of his head.

"Contact Army Command then, ask them for an update on the installation's status."

Kim did as she was told, but there was still no result. Her face grew a little dim.

"That… I can't contact Army Command, either, sir. All communications seem to be down."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments.

"So we're completely cut off from everyone? Is it because of the blizzard?"

Establishing a stable connection had grown a bit hard lately, but they were yet to experience a complete communication blackout. After all, Sunny had spent a ton of contribution points to upgrade the Rhino's comms array.

Kim hesitated.

"I can't say, sir. A simple blizzard is not supposed to mess with the signal so much."

Sunny rubbed his face.

'That doesn't sound good…'

He sighed, then sent his shadows out into the snowstorm. They spread around the speeding Rhino, searching for any sign of danger that could have been hiding in the white haze. However, no matter how hard the shadows looked, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Sunny remained on guard throughout the remainder of their journey. Minutes passed by without anything happening. Soon, there was a soft sound and some movement in the lounge area — Belle, Quentin, and Dorn returned from the Dream Realm and climbed out of the sleeping nooks, looking rested and refreshed.

Even though the big man still showed some discomfort, his injury was well on its way to being healed.

Just like that, half an hour flew by. Sunny caught sight of the research installation long before the powerful projectors of the Rhino flooded its gates with light.

The facility looked more like a small fortress settlement than a scientific base. It was perched dangerously close to the ocean shore, and had a thick wall surrounding it, with powerful turrets aiming at the dark waves. There was a large dome-like structure towering above the formidable fortress, painted white on the backdrop of the black sky. It resembled a giant, perfectly smooth egg.

The facility had no official name, and was known simply as LO49. Sunny had no idea what kind of research was being done on its premises, but considering that there was a sizable garrison of Awakened guarding the installation — complete with an Ascended commander — it had to be pretty important.

The best evidence that the scientists living here were doing very valuable work, though, was the fact that Sunny and his soldiers had

been sent to retrieve them.

"Luster, slow down. We're near."

The Rhino gradually reduced its speed and approached the settlement. Beams of light soon illuminated a small fleet of transport vehicles parked in front of it, seemingly waiting to take the staff away as soon as the reinforcements arrived.

For a moment, Sunny felt a pang of fear. It was as though the whole facility was empty, with only ghosts populating its streets.

Then, however, the turrets above the gates moved, taking aim at the approaching APC. Powerful spotlights ignited on the wall, cutting through the snow and flooding the immediate area with stark light.

The Rhino drove to the fleet of transport vehicles and parked nearby. At the same time, the heavy gates of the fortress opened, and a lone human figure walked into the blizzard.

With a sigh, Sunny opened the hatch of the Rhino and climbed out into the cold.

He walked forward and studied the stranger.

The man was tall, strong, and looked to be around forty. He was dressed in a black bodysuit similar to one Sunny wore, with an unzipped parka resting on top of it. He had dark hair and calm, intelligent eyes. There was a composed expression on his stern and weary face.

Overall, everything about the stranger spoke of experience and discipline.

Sunny stopped a few steps away and gave him a nod.

"I am Ascended Sunless, captain of the First Irregular Company of the Evacuation Army. You should have been informed of our arrival."

The tall man lingered for a few moments, studying him, then returned his nod.

"I am Ascended Verne."

He offered his hand to Sunny and said in a steady voice:

"...Welcome to LO49, Master Sunless."

Chapter-877: Disconnected

Sunny and his soldiers entered the fortified settlement, happy to hide from the blizzard behind its thick walls. There, they saw teams of Awakened soldiers walking between buildings as they patrolled the territory. All of them looked tense and tired.

Master Verne led them deeper into the complex, giving a wide berth to the central dome-like structure. His gait was steady and confident.

"I have around a hundred Awakened under my command, as well as close to a thousand mundane soldiers. There are about five hundred scientists and civilian staff members under our protection. Things were going fine until recently… but, as you can imagine, all of us can't wait to get away from the ocean."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"...Were going fine?"

Verne grimaced.

"Yes. Several Gates manifested nearby, but our garrison and defenses were more than enough to keep the Nightmare Creatures away. However… there have already been instances of people succumbing to the Spell within the walls. We suffered a few casualties because of that."

He lingered for a moment, and then asked:

"How is the situation outside?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Pretty bleak, but more or less under control. Don't worry… we scouted a good path through the mountains on the way here. Leading

a convoy back shouldn't be impossible. There is just one problem…"

Verne stopped and looked at him with a somber expression.

"The communications? You lost contact with Army Command too?"

Sunny blinked.

"Yeah. Wait, too? You're cut off from the army network as well?

The local Ascended remained silent for a second, then nodded.

"All communications ceased around forty-three minutes ago. We have failed to establish a new connection, for now."

Sunny frowned. He could reluctantly accept that the Rhino lacked the ability to pierce through the growing interference field enveloping Antarctica. However, a facility like LO49 should have had an immensely powerful communication array. If even they could not connect to the outside world…

'Something is very wrong here.'

He did not know the reason for that sudden blackout, but just the consequences of not being in contact with Army Command were troublesome. They were supposed to check in with Master Jet and receive further instructions after reaching their destination.

Sunny glanced at Verne.

"That is really weird. Uh, no offense, but… a remote research facility in the middle of nowhere, suddenly losing contact with the outside world as we approach it… it's all a bit creepy. This blackout wouldn't have anything to do with what the scientists are doing here, would it?"

The tall Ascended smiled with the corner of his mouth.

"I can see how you would think that. However, let me assure you, the research being conducted in this installation is perfectly safe. I am not much of a scientist myself, but what they do here is purely theoretical. There are no practical experiments being conducted at

the premises, so there's nothing that could have gone wrong.

The worst that could have happened is someone making a mistake on a spreadsheet and being reprimanded by the old man."

Sunny studied his face, found it sufficiently sincere, and shrugged.

"Well, if you say so. The old man you mentioned is the VIP I am supposed to deliver to safety?"

Verne nodded.

"Yes, the chief researcher. He is a bit eccentric, but means well… most of the time. I was about to introduce you to him."

Sunny sighed.

"Lead the way, then. But we should probably solve the communication problem before that."

Sunny didn't like being blind, and becoming cut off from Army Command was similar to losing his sight. Without the information about what was happening throughout the Antarctic Center, he felt more vulnerable than he would have preferred.

Neither the Rhino nor the communication center of this research facility were currently able to establish a connection with the outside world, but there were other ways to achieve what he wanted. They were Awakened, after all, and Awakened were free to travel between two worlds.

Even if hundreds or thousands of kilometers separated him and his cohort from Army Command and the other cohorts of the First Irregular Company, out there in the Dream Realm, that distance did not matter.

As long as two Awakened were anchored to the same Citadel and visited it at the same time, they could freely exchange information even if the technological means of communication had broken down in the real world.

Knowing that, he glanced at Verne and asked a very important

question:

"What's the status in this place?"

Verne hesitated.

"It was green forty-three minutes ago."

Of course, with no Army Command, there would be no updates on the condition of Gate interference and the potency of the Call surrounding the base. However, Awakened — and especially Masters — could make a judgment on that matter themselves. They were the ones affected by the Call, after all.

It's just that their personal senses were not as precise as the complex calculations and observation data provided by the headquarters. That was why Army Command had issued a recommendation to only trust the verified status updates.

Verne was someone who liked to do things by the book, it seemed.

Sunny closed his eyes and listened to the whispers of the Call. They were so faint as to be almost nonexistent. Nothing appeared to have changed in the past forty-three minutes.

He opened his eyes.

"...Should still be green. Luster, Samara, and Kim. Go get some sleep and find out what the hell happened. Try to get information from Colonel Jet herself or one of our captains, if you can. We were supposed to receive more detailed orders, anyway."

With that, he would be able to find out more about the situation in about eight hours. Considering that Sunny had to guide a convoy containing more than a thousand people to a siege capital, he needed to know as much as he could about the condition of their supposed route.

Verne nodded.

"You can bunk in that building over there. The sleeping pods we have here are rather nice."

The rest of the cohort followed him into another building, where they entered an elevator and descended underground. Soon, Sunny found himself in a spacious chamber that resembled a lecture hall. There, an extremely old man in a white lab coat was discussing something with a young assistant.

Verne cleared his throat, attracting his attention.

"Professor, this is Master Sunless. He will be in charge of getting you out of here."

Then, he glanced at Sunny and added in a subdued tone:

"Master Sunless, this is the chief researcher of LO49. Professor Obel…"

Chapter-878: VIP

There were not a lot of old people in the outskirts, where average life expectancy was rather low. However, even in the city proper, elderly were not a common sight — simply because the previous generations had been decimated by the arrival of the Nightmare Spell. So, Sunny had little experience dealing with really old people.

The man in front of him, however, was not just old… he was certifiably ancient. He had to be eighty years, at least, or even older. His skin was thin like paper, with knotty blue veins clearly visible beneath it, and his neatly combed hair was completely white. The old man's eyes, however, were still brimming with sharp intelligence and awareness.

This was someone who had been born long before the descent of the Nightmare Spell, and lived both through the terror of the Dark Times and the turbulent chaos of the modern era.

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"...Obel? The Professor Obel?"

The old man smiled.

"You know who I am, Master Sunless? How flattering! It's nice to see that the young generation still appreciates obscure scientists like me."

His assistant — a young woman with dark hair that was gathered in a bun and eyes full of attitude — sneered.

"Indeed. I thought all Awakened only know how to swing a sword."

Sunny gave her a deadpan stare.

"...For your information, I am a researcher and lecturer back in the

Academy, with several academic publications under my name. I only swing a sword when there's a reason to."

The assistant blinked, then looked down in embarrassment.

"Oh…"

Professor Obel let out a good-natured chuckle.

"Don't be rude, Beth! In any case… we'll be in your care then, Master Sunless."

He looked at Sunny with curiosity, and then asked:

"What department are you assigned to in the Academy, if you don't mind me asking?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Wilderness Survival. My specialty is Dream Realm exploration and the history of dead languages."

Professor Obel raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Do you, perhaps, know a brat named Julius?"

Sunny stared at him in bewilderment.

"Uh… Teacher Julius? Of course. He is my mentor, after all. But I wouldn't call him a… a brat. With all due respect."

The old man laughed.

"He is to me! Julius used to be my student, you know, before Awakening and choosing a different field of expertise. How is that rascal doing?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head. Never in his life had he imagined hearing someone address Teacher Julius as a bratty rascal…

"He is doing great. His health is good… and he is very passionate about his research…"

Professor Obel nodded in satisfaction.

"Good, this is good. Then… Master Sunless, what happens now? Are we leaving LO49 already?"

His assistant frowned and looked across the chamber, where lots of scientists were busy copying data on external storage devices and running around in something that resembled panic.

Sunny shook his head.

"That… we can't contact Army Command right now, so it's hard to say. There will be news in around eight hours. That is the earliest we can leave, but depending on what information comes back, there can be a delay."

The young woman — Beth — sighed with relief.

"Ah, great. I was afraid we will have to abandon a lot of data. We will continue preparations for departure, then…"

A few moments passed in awkward silence. Finally, she looked at Sunny in confusion.

"...Are you not going to leave?"

He grinned, then shook his head.

"You're in my care now, so I'll stick around. If the Professor suddenly dies on my watch… well, I can say goodbye to a lot of contribution points… that would be very sad."

Beth stared at him with indignation, then scoffed and left to help the scientists pack things up. At the same time, Master Verne bowed slightly and took his leave, saying that he had a lot to do. Belle, Dorn, and Quentin left, as well.

Professor Obel watched them go and sighed.

"Don't mind my assistant, Master Sunless. All of us are on edge these days."

Sunny shrugged.

"Understandable."

After a while, he looked at the old man and asked:

"So, Professor… what exactly are you researching here? Also, LO49… that's a strange name for a facility."

The old man smiled.

"The name? Oh, it's just an abbreviation. Lunar Observatory Forty-Nine, that is what it means. Have you not noticed the telescope dome when you arrived?"

Sunny coughed.

'An observatory…'

So that was the purpose of that weird dome-shaped structure. Sunny had thought that it was some kind of strange magical construct, but it was just a mundane observatory. To his defense, he had never seen one of those before, at least not in real life…

"Ah, yes. I did notice a dome. You're studying… the moon?"

Professor Obel laughed.

"Goodness, no. Around a hundred of these observatories were built when the Nightmare Spell first appeared, but most of them are now sealed and abandoned. This one had its telescope dismantled and was repurposed as a research facility, though."

Sunny frowned, feeling like he was missing something.

"Wait… why were these observatories constructed? And why were they abandoned?"

The old man glanced at him with curiosity.

"Why, they were constructed to observe the moon, of course. There were human settlements on the moon in the past, you know… not

that that is important. What is important is the Nightmare Spell."

Sunny shook his head.

"I don't follow."

Professor Obel lingered for a moment.

"Ah, you might not know this. Actually, the first registered case of the Nightmare Spell infection happened in one of the moon settlements. Mind you, that doesn't mean that it was the first case… just the first documented one. No one really knows where the Spell came from, but many point to Luna as its origin, or at least the point of contact.

So, of course, there was a strong desire to study the moon many decades ago."

Sunny looked at him with a wary expression.

"Really? Wait… so what did people find out?"

The old man shook his head.

"Nothing. As it turned out, staring at the moon for too long can lead to some very, very dire consequences. After many casualties among the researchers, the LO program was discontinued, and the observatories were sealed. I would advise you not to look at the moon too closely, young man… actually, it's better not to think about it at all."

Sunny remained silent for a long time. Eventually, he said:

"Alright, I guess that answers one of my questions. But what about the other? If you are not studying the moon, what are you researching here?"

Professor Obel smiled.

"Oh, that is very simple. We are studying the Nightmare Spell. More precisely, we are trying to understand its causality."

Chapter-879: Signs of Lightning

Sunny glanced at the old scientist with interest.

"Causality? Do you mean its reason?"

Professor Obel smiled.

"No, nothing so philosophical! What I mean is that we are exploring the cause and effect of various phenomena having to do with the Spell, as well as correlations between them. Of course, our study mainly has to do with the Nightmare Gates, but since nothing exists in isolation, we need to consider the system in its entirety."

Sunny considered his words for a while.

"Is this how you make the Obel Scale work?"

The old man shook his head with an amused look.

"That thing? No, not quite. The so-called "Obel Scale" is a primitive work that I and many talented colleagues of mine created in the early days of the Spell. It is relatively effective for what it is supposed to do, but the solution is purely practical. It can track and predict manifestation events, but does not shine a light on how and why they are happening.

Back then, we had no time to ponder such things. We needed to come up with an immediate and effective measure, limited as it might be."

He sighed, and then said in a wistful tone:

"You see… a caveman can observe lightning and know that being hit by lightning is dangerous. Therefore, he can learn to recognize the signs of an approaching thunderstorm and take shelter from it. However, without understanding the principles of why and how

lightning appears, a caveman cannot invent a lightning rod, build a Faraday cage, or harness the power of electricity.

So, that is how our work here differs from the "Obel" Scale. That old solution is simply a tool to recognize the signs of a thunderstorm and assign a numerical value to the probability of lightning striking a particular spot, while we are trying to understand its principles."

Sunny listened to the elderly scientist attentively. When else would he get a chance to converse with someone so learned and knowledgeable? Luckily, Professor Obel seemed to either be fond of educating young people in general, or was simply in a talkative mood.

Deciding to use this chance to learn something new, Sunny asked:

"How does the Obel Scale work, anyway?"

The old man chuckled.

"Ah, it's not too complicated. You are familiar with a pulse that the manifestation of a Nightmare Gate produces, right? Depending on the Category of a Gate, it differs in potency and characteristics, spreads over a certain radius, and affects a certain volume of space. The more powerful the Gate, the greater the impact."

Sunny tentatively nodded, prompting Professor Obel to give him a small smile.

"Well, in truth, that pulse is a bit more complicated than that, because it spreads not only through space, but also through time. So, if we know what to look for, we can detect faint aftershocks of a Gate impulse before it actually appears.

Of course, that requires a vast and expensive network of sensors and monitoring satellites to monitor the entire globe, or at least those areas that we deem important."

Sunny blinked.

"Uh... what exactly do you mean when you say that the impulse spreads through time, Professor?"

The old man looked at him and remained silent for a few moments.

"How do I put it… try to imagine time as a river, young man. It always flows forward, from the past into the future, and we travel forward with its current. Now, imagine that someone threw a rock into that river. There would be ripples on its surface, wouldn't there? And those ripples, unlike the waters of the river itself, would travel both downstream and upstream. Hence, we can detect those ripples.

From a bit further up the stream."

Sunny couldn't help but scratch his head. What Professor Obel said was not hard to understand… however, it was a bit harder to accept.

'Perhaps if I think about it in a different way…'

Sunny imagined a string of a harp. Someone plucked it in the middle, sending a vibration spreading both up and down. Downward was the future, and upward was the past.

Then, he imagined the inconceivable tapestry of Fate, and the neverending expanse of its countless strings, each stretching from nowhere to infinity. A certain event happened, making small sections of several strings tremble.

Was that what the old man was talking about?

A subtle frown appeared on his face.

'Come to think of it… does affinity to revelations, perhaps, work based on the same principle?'

Sunny hesitated for a bit, and then cautiously said:

"I… I think I understand? Maybe."

Professor Obel smiled.

"Good! However, as I said, this is just a primitive solution. That solution only observes the effect without understanding the cause. And the cause… why, it is much harder to comprehend. Truth be told, I don't think that humans like us can even conceive of it in its

entirety.

In fact, the predominant school of modern thought states that the Nightmare Spell is acausal by nature, meaning that it does not even adhere to the principle of cause and effect. That it's magic, so to speak."

He grimaced.

"I don't agree, obviously. But, anyway, trying to understand even a little bit of the causality of the Spell is a daunting task, so we limit the scope of our research to a small fraction of it… namely, the Nightmare Gates."

The old man's face darkened a little.

"...However, even that has proved to be an insurmountable task, I'm afraid. For now."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"How so?"

Professor Obel smiled bleakly.

"Oh… well, to be honest… this might sound funny to you… but we are not even sure that Nightmare Gates have anything to do with the Nightmare Spell…"

He seemed to have expected to be rebuked, but Sunny did not react to that statement too much. Instead, he thought for a bit, and then asked calmly:

"Really?"

The old man looked at him with a bit of surprise.

"You are not against that idea?"

Sunny shrugged.

"During my Second Nightmare, I was separated from the Spell for a

while. I couldn't summon my Memories, visit my Soul Sea, or even hear its voice. However, my Aspect and powers were still with me. So, I figured that Aspects, at least, exist outside the Spell. If Aspects are their own thing, why can't Nightmare Gates be? Oh… that doesn't mean that I'm convinced, though.

I am just open to the possibility."

Professor Obel looked at him with gleaming eyes.

"Separated from the Spell? Fascinating! Young man… please, do share your experiences with me later."

Sunny grinned.

"No problem. However, if you do publish something as a result… I'll be entitled to receive some points, right? You know, as a contributor."

Chapter-880: Cause and Effect

The old man chuckled and looked at his subordinates, who were packing things up in a hurry. After a while, he sighed.

"Whether Nightmare Gates are produced by the Spell or not, there is definitely a connection between the two. Or rather, the three… since Awakened are also part of this equation."

He grew silent after that, and then added in a more serious tone:

"What interests me the most, however, is which of the three came first."

Sunny looked at him with surprise.

"Forgive me, Professor, but isn't that common knowledge? The Spell came first, bringing with it the Nightmares. Then, we Awakened appeared as the result."

He frowned slightly.

"...Of course, common knowledge is not always trustworthy. But in this case, it seems to follow logic."

Professor Obel shook his head.

"Who can really say? The beginnings of the Spell are not documented well. Back then… the world was not in the best shape, and by the time we knew that something was happening, it was already out of our ability to prevent, contain, or control. We tried, of course, but… even then, some truths never get to become widely known, or even be put on paper at all. It is very likely that what you said is true.

There are other possibilities, though, ones that would demand entirely different solutions."

Sunny looked at him with a perplexed expression.

"What do you mean?"

The elderly scientist hesitated.

"Have you ever asked yourself this… did the Spell bring Nightmares with it, or did the Nightmares bring the Spell? Ah, forgive me. This is still too broad. Here is another question — do the Nightmares produce the Awakened, or do the Awakened produce the Nightmares?"

Sunny blinked.

"What?"

The old man smiled.

"Consider it a mental exercise. Of course, it is widely known that one becomes an Awakened through surviving the First Nightmare. However, after that, things become more interesting… you are too young to remember, but at the beginning of it all, the disasters of the Spell descended on the waking world in stages. Otherwise, we would have never survived."

Professor Obel's eyes suddenly became distant, as if he was remembering a distant past.

"At first, there were only those infected by the Spell. Some of them became Sleepers, and some became Dormant abominations. Then, after the first solstice, there were Awakened. However, there were also Nightmare Gates of the Second Category, and with them, more powerful creatures came into our world. Eventually, there were more Sleepers, more Awakened… there were also Masters.

But with them came more Gates, and more Gates that were unlike anything we had ever seen."

He paused.

"Then there were Saints. And North America. And now, we have the Chain of Nightmares… one can't help but wonder."

Sunny did not like the sound of that.

'What is he trying to say?'

"...Wonder about what?"

The fragile old man let out a heavy sigh.

"This is just a scientific inquiry, Master Sunless. Don't take it close to heart. As scientists, our duty is to ask questions, and one of these questions is whether there is a correlation between the number and power of Awakened in our world and the number and power of the Nightmare Gates that manifest here. Awakened and Nightmares… which of these elements is the cause, and which is the effect?"

Sunny thought for a bit, then simply shook his head.

"Your argument has a big flaw, Professor. If there really was a correlation and we, Awakened, were somehow responsible for attracting bigger and better Nightmare Gates, then there would not have been a Category Five Gate in North America before a bunch of Supremes ran around the world. I think you are just giving in to the desire to see patterns in the chaos that all us, humans, share."

There were three Sovereigns alive in the world right now, but there had not been any when that Gate swallowed an entire continent. In any case, Sunny was not going to mention the Supremes as anything but a theoretical possibility.

Professor Obel nodded with appreciation.

"Good thinking, young man! It is always good to have a healthy amount of skepticism. However… your point is only unassailable if we assume a crucial detail to be true."

Sunny frowned.

"Yes? What detail?"

The old man looked at the scientist surrounding them and smiled with a bit of sadness.

"That the impact of a powerful Awakened emerging only flows down the river of time as we, mortals, do. However… if it spreads like a ripple through time, just like the aftershock of a Gate manifesting itself into reality, then it doesn't matter when their Ascension happens. The first Supreme might appear in a few years, but the consequences of their rise could have already burdened us years ago."

His fatigued eyes suddenly shone with strange light.

"As for the harrowing Gate that destroyed North America… who knows? Maybe it is just an echo of a god emerging from the human race in a distant, dire future…"

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Some time later, Sunny left his shadow in the laboratory to stand watch and went to check on his soldiers. As he walked through the underground complex, his expression was dark.

What Professor Obel had told him… Sunny was not exactly buying it. At least not entirely. However, he felt that there were a few nuggets of truth in what the old man believed, even if the scientists might have come to the wrong conclusions based on those theories.

The ripples of time, the disasters that came from the future and thus paved the path for their eventual inception, thus creating a weird self-contained paradox… Sunny was dubious about the validity, and even sanity, of these ideas.

In his experience, the simplest answer was most often correct. Professor Obel seemed to have lost sight of that fact.

There was one theory, however, that made him restless.

'Can the Ascension of many Awakened really cause the growing number and intensity of the Nightmare Gates?'

He did not really see how that could be the case. After all, one had to go through a Nightmare first to become Awakened, not the other way around. However, however…

If he assumed that there really was a correlation… one thing would

make more sense.

Walking through the dark corridors, Sunny scowled.

'...Can this be the reason why the Sovereigns are suppressing the emergence of new Saints? No, more than that. Can this be the reason why none of them challenged the Fifth Nightmare yet?'

In the past, he had thought that all of this hidden oppression was just the result of the ambition and lust for power consuming Asterion, Anvil of Valor, and Ki Song.

But was that the only reason?

Sunny let out a frustrated sigh.

He simply did not know…

Chapter-881: Change of Plans

Outside, the blizzard was still rampaging across the world, drowning reality in a murky white haze. It was hard for a Master like Sunny to get cold, but even still, he shivered and hurried to get back inside. Entering the building that housed the sleeping pods of the cohort members, he nodded at Verne, who was already waiting there with a somber face.

By now, around eight hours had passed since their arrival. The people Sunny had sent into the Dream Realm would be returning any minute now.

The steady Master looked at him and asked:

"How did your meeting with the Professor go?"

Sunny shrugged.

"We had an… interesting talk. He is an outstanding person."

It was strange, really. Professor Obel was a mundane human, but he had probably saved more lives than any Awakened Sunny knew of. Without the predictive system the old man had developed, countless people would have been swallowed by the emerging Gates over the decades. Sunny knew how dangerous a sudden manifestation of a Gate in a populous area could be. He had faced one himself, after all.

Verne silently nodded.

"That he is. I hope you understand now why it is so important to deliver him and his scientists to safety, Master Sunless. Their work must continue."

Sunny wanted to answer, but at that moment, the sleeping pods came to life, announcing that the people occupying them were waking up.

Samara, Kim, and Luster returned almost at the same time. They climbed out of the pods and put on their clothes with dark expressions on their faces.

'I guess the news is not too good…'

At that moment, Luster blurted:

"Captain, sir! Bad… it's really bad!"

Sunny looked at him darkly.

"...I gathered as much. Speak."

The three Awakened looked at each other. Eventually, it was Kim who addressed the Masters:

"The situation is still unclear, but there was some sort of earthquake, followed by the manifestation of multiple Category Three Gates. There were also several titans that emerged. The three Saints fought one of them above the strait between West Antarctica and the Center… and then, communications across all the Southern Quadrant went down.

By the time we left the Citadel, people were still trying to understand what happened."

Sunny's face darkened. All of that sounded very troublesome. It seemed that the Chain of Nightmares had reached a qualitative change, plunging Antarctica in chaos.

"What about our orders? Have you heard from Colonel Jet?"

Samara spoke in a subdued tone:

"She did pass on instructions, sir."

'Well, at least something went well.'

Judging by the heavy gazes of his subordinates, however, he would not like what they were about to say.

Master Verne frowned as he looked at the beautiful sharpshooter.

"Well? What does Army Command want us to do?"

Samara sighed.

"The region between this installation and the nearest siege capital is judged to be too dangerous to traverse. All the Antarctic Center is affected, but its southern edge was seemingly hit the worst. So… we can't go back. The previous evacuation plan was scrapped."

Verne did not say anything, but his jaw muscles tightened. It looked as if he was on the verge of uttering a curse, which said a lot about how dissatisfied the man was with the news. From what Sunny had observed, Verne was a very uptight and proper person.

…He himself was far from feeling elated, as well. Being stuck in a remote facility with no route of escape was not as bad as it could get, but very close to it.

Sunny cursed for the both of them.

"So, what? Are we supposed to just stay here and wait for death?"

Samara shook her head.

"We received new orders, sir. Although evacuation by land seems to be impossible at the moment, the naval convoy that delivered us to Antarctica is already on the way back to pick up the second batch of refugees. One of the vessels, battleship Ariadne, is going to be rerouted to the southern edge of the Antarctic Center. If all goes well, it will reach us in two to three weeks.

We are ordered to fortify LO49's defenses and await its arrival."

Verne let out a relieved sigh.

"I see. Three weeks… that should be doable."

Sunny, however, was not too enthused. The thought of going back aboard a ship did not sound very alluring… on the other hand, traversing hundreds of kilometers of rugged terrain with two

thousand local soldiers and civilians, as well as no reconnaissance data from Army Command and an unknown number of titans walking around, seemed like an even worse idea.

He shrugged with a grimace.

"I see. Well… I guess we got ourselves a small vacation."

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Considering that the cohort was going to spend at least two weeks at the research facility, Sunny told his soldiers to make themselves at home. The Rhino was brought within the walls of the fortress, and they chose to use it as their living quarters instead of settling in one of the buildings.

The new environment, really, was a welcomed change. The cohort was exhausted after a month of constant fighting, and this forced break, although unexpected, could potentially give them ample time to rest and recuperate.

If something did not go really, really wrong, of course.

LO49 was a large facility, and offered the members of the cohort a lot of opportunities to entertain themselves and pass time. They could eat in the mess hall, relax in one of the recreational lounges, or even visit a small library. The most refreshing change, however, was simply being among new people.

Conversing with the civilian staff of the installation reminded them of the calm times before the Chain of Nightmares.

There were just two places that Sunny forbade his soldiers from approaching — the old observatory and the outer wall that oversaw the ocean. Even though the observatory had its telescope dismantled, he still didn't like it. The ocean, meanwhile… Sunny was just prejudiced against dark water, for a good reason.

A few days passed in relative peace, and then a week. The news coming from the north was still strangely vague and fragmented.

Then, however, that peace was spoiled by a sudden and dangerous

development.

Chapter-882: Condition Yellow

Sunny was staring at the black waves that came and went, licking the stone shore not too far away from the tall wall of the fortress. Even though he had told his soldiers to stay away from the ocean, Sunny came here once or twice every day, perhaps hoping to see the fearsome silhouette of the giant battleship emerging from the darkness.

That was silly, of course, since the arrival of their ride away from LO49 was days, or even weeks away. Still, he found himself in a contemplative mood whenever he observed the waves. He was also reasonably sure in his ability to get away should anything other than Ariadne appear from the ocean…

The blizzard finally subsided a few hours ago, so today, Sunny saw much further than before. Not that there was anything to see.

Shivering in the cold, he sighed and turned around to go find warmth inside one of the station's buildings.

It was at that moment that Sunny froze and tilted his head, as if listening to something. His eyes narrowed.

"...Crap."

The maddening whispers assaulting his mind had just grown much louder.

Jumping off the wall, Sunny walked quickly and soon reached the security center of the facility. There, several Awakened were monitoring the sensor feeds. Verne was standing in front of a wall of screens with a dark expression on his face.

Hearing Sunny's steps, he turned his head.

"You felt it too?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah. It's strong."

Verne closed his eyes for a few moments.

"This complicates things."

That was an understatement. What they sensed was the Call, which had suddenly grown much stronger. That meant two things, none of them promising anything good to the people isolated inside LO49.

The first thing was rather obvious… somewhere out there, very close to the facility, one or more Nightmare Gates had just opened. Considering how loud the Call was, Sunny was willing to bet that there were two of them, at least.

The second thing was not immediately dangerous, but vastly more insidious.

Verne gritted his teeth, then sighed and pressed a few buttons on the console in front of him. Then, he spoke, his voice being carried all across the fortress by the integrated speakers:

"Attention all Awakened personnel. This is Master Verne speaking… effective immediately, the interference status of the LO49 facility should be considered to be changed from green to yellow. I repeat…"

Sunny's face was bleak. With the strength of the Call growing so much, the stability of the Gateway anchors of the Awakened inside the fortress was bound to become weaker. It was not at the stage where falling asleep would definitely lead to being thrown into an unknown region of the Dream Realm, yet… but close to it.

What it really meant was that, from now on, falling asleep within the walls of LO49 was a gamble for all Awakened defending it. The probability of becoming pulled away by the Seed of Nightmare was not high, but it was also not zero.

'Damnation.'

Worse still, there were the Gates themselves to deal with. Considering that they had to have opened close enough to strengthen the Call, the Nightmare Creatures brought by them would undoubtedly come to visit, attracted by the smell of human souls.

Finishing his announcement, Verne looked at Sunny with weary eyes. Sunny nodded.

"I'm on it."

Four shadows burst from his figure, swiftly gliding across the floor and leaving the security center a second later. They flew across the facility, climbed its walls, and plunged into the cold dark night beyond.

Verne, meanwhile, started giving orders to his subordinates. Soon, junior officers of the security force, which numbered close to a battalion, were summoned from all over LO49. Considering their expertise and rank, the Devils were naturally included in this list.

By the time everyone arrived, Sunny's shadows were already scouring the vicinity of the fortress, searching for the manifested Gates. Verne briefed his people on what had happened. As he spoke, the faces of the soldiers changed slightly, knowing that they were going into battle soon.

Only the Irregulars remained nonchalant.

Finally, Sunny sighed.

"Found it."

The coastal plain did not have a lot of geographic features, so it was easy to discover the menacing rift that tore apart reality. He was slightly surprised that there was only one Gate, but then again, it seemed to be a potent one.

As everyone stared at him, Sunny winced slightly.

"...There is a single Gate, about three kilometers away from the northern wall. It seemed to be Category Three."

The mundane soldiers among them paled, and even Awakened seemed disturbed. He did not pay them attention.

"The Nightmare Creatures are… wait, what the hell?"

He frowned. Usually, a Gate disgorged Nightmare Creatures of similar origin, at least during the first wave. These ones, however, were all over the place. Some were comically small, while some were large. Some were bestial, while some were bipedal. It was a whole menagerie of monsters.

"The Nightmare Creatures all look different from each other."

A fierce scowl appeared on Verne's face.

"The Scavengers… we fought their kind before. They start weak, but quickly grow stronger by devouring corpses. They inherit qualities of the things that they eat, too. Younger abominations are easy to deal with, but the older ones… the older ones are truly vile."

Sunny pondered for a bit.

"I see. Well, we seem to be in luck. There are about three hundred them, and I only see two Corrupted. The Gate Guardian… is a Demon."

The soldiers shuddered and stared at him with a bit of resentment. If that was what the captain of the Irregular considered luck, then what the hell could be called misfortune?!

Three hundred powerful Nightmare Creatures led by two Corrupted, against a hundred Awakened, two Masters, and a thousand mundane servicemen of the local garrison… the situation did not look too good.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then smiled.

"Ah, and the last piece of news. The bastards have caught our scent. So… they are already heading here…"

Chapter-883: Sortie

There was not much time to prepare and make plans, since the abominations were going to reach LO49 in mere minutes. The shrill alarms blasted throughout the facility, and powerful spotlights ignited on its walls, flooding the snow-covered plain with light. Civilians rushed to shelters, while soldiers ran to man the defensive fortifications.

Sunny and his cohort followed, summoning their Memories as they calmly prepared for battle. As they walked through bitter cold, he spoke:

"After we deal with the Nightmare Creatures, everyone is to remain awake until we board the ship. You know the drill. We won't be sleeping for a week, at least. Maybe two. Get the stimulants from Quentin and keep each other in check."

The Devils grumbled. They had already completed a few long missions in areas where sleep was deadly. A week was unpleasant, but doable… two weeks, however, was going to be a hellish challenge.

'I just hope that Ariadne arrives on time.'

It was not like they had any acceptable choice other than sit and wait...

At that moment, someone called out to Sunny.

"Hey, you… uh, Master Sunless, or whatever… what is going on?"

He looked to the side and saw Beth — Professor Obel's assistant — shivering in the cold in her civilian clothes and flimsy lab coat. The young woman's hair was gathered in a bun, like always, but a few stubborn locks had wrestled free and were now dancing in the wind.

Her pale face wore an irritated scowl, but he could see fear and alarm hiding behind that temperamental mask.

In the past week, Sunny had spent most of his time with or near the scientists. When he was away, one of his shadows usually kept watch. He had spoken with the old man a lot, learning all kinds of things about the tumultuous times of the First Generation, the world before that, and the scientific understanding — or rather, the lack of it — of the Nightmare Spell.

So, he had come to know Beth rather well, too. That was why he knew for a fact that she was pretending to barely remember his name on purpose.

'Gods. She is even more petty than I am!'

As the bleak steel of the Undying Chain appeared from nothingness and embraced his body, Sunny looked at the young woman and smiled.

"What do you think is going on? There's a big Gate and a lot of nasty Nightmare Creatures coming this way. We'll go deal with them real quick. You head back, gather the scientists, and lock yourselves in the safe room. Alright?"

She lingered for a moment, then nodded.

"Yeah… alright."

With that, Beth turned around and ran back into the door of the research center. Sunny shook his head and continued forward. Soon, they reached the top of the northern wall and observed the vast expanse of the coastal plain.

None of the abominations had reached the facility yet, but it was just a matter of time. As turret towers whined, ramping up their engines, Samara placed her rifle on the lip of the wall and looked through its scope.

Verne, who was now clad in polished plate armor, holding a shield and a short sword in his hands, looked at Sunny.

"What do you think?"

Sunny remained silent for a moment. His shadows were still following the swarm of Nightmare Creatures, so he was studying them.

He had been honest — of course — when he said that they were lucky. As far as Category Three Gates went, this one was surprisingly weak. He was even confused by the fact that it affected the strength of the Call so much. The power of the wave of abominations brought by it was incomparable to the Stone Hive, for example. Back then, the Irregulars had to face a whole score of Corrupted creatures.

This time, there were only two, and the strongest of them was merely a Demon. Of course, the word "merely" could hardly be applied to a Corrupted Demon, but still…

Finally, Sunny spoke:

"It is not a big deal. I will deal with the Gate Guardian, and you deal with the other Corrupted. Awakened Kim will support you. Can you handle it?"

Asking an average Awakened to fight a Fallen abomination was not an easy request. However, asking an average Master to face a Corrupted one was less so, because all Masters were elites by definition. There was a fundamental distinction between Awakened and Ascended, since most of the former had no choice in what they had become, but the latter could only be what they were by choice.

So, Sunny was reasonably sure that Verne would survive a battle against a Corrupted scavenger.

The local Master hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

"I'll handle it."

Sunny grinned.

"That's the spirit."

With that, he stepped forward and leaped off the wall into the cold

darkness below. The soldiers of the garrison seemed startled by his sudden jump, but the Devils remained nonchalant. They were long accustomed to their captain's bizarre actions.

Landing on the snow, Sunny considered the situation for a moment. He was thinking whether he should summon Saint… eventually, he decided against it, for now. Her help would only be needed if the enemy turned out to be more dangerous than he had judged.

Sunny did, however, summon the Sin of Solace.

As his hand took hold of the onyx hilt of the beautiful longsword, ghostly whispers assaulted his mind. It was already strained by the insidious and exhausting pull of the Call, so the additional burden seemed even heavier. Sunny winced and shook his head, chasing them away.

'So annoying…'

The Sin of Solace scratched at his sanity, its murmurs slowly growing clearer, louder, more insistent...

At that moment, Samara's rifle discharged, and the sound of a magical slug breaking the sound barrier boomed from somewhere above. A moment later, the turrets came to life, sending a hail of tungsten rounds into the swarm of approaching abominations.

Grinning, Sunny sent essence flowing into his muscles and chased after the bullets.

Chapter-884: Sinister Blade

Four shadows flew across the snow, following the swarm of Nightmare Creatures. As a shining slug flashed through the darkness, gruesomely tearing apart one of the monsters, they surged forward and fused with a lonely figure that was running to meet the charging abominations.

In the next moment, several streams of tracer rounds swept across the first row of the swarm, sending pieces of bone armor and chunks of flesh flying into the cold air.

Sunny wrapped one of his shadows around his body, one around his armor, and one around his blade. The last slid past and flew back to the tall wall of the LO49 installation. Its task was to find Professor Obel and stand watch, should something unexpected happen in the civilian shelter.

…Sadly, the turrets had not been as effective as Sunny had hoped. Several abominations were slowed down or wounded, but most of the bullets bounced off their tough hides ineffectively. The defense systems of the fortress continued to rain hellfire on the Nightmare Creatures, though, tearing the silent night apart with bright muzzle flashes and the thundering staccato of the fusillade.

Long plumes of fire bloomed from the thick barrels of the turrets like the breath of a dragon.

'I need to be careful not to be shot in the back…'

Lunging forward, Sunny clashed with the vanguard of the approaching swarm. He did not really have time to engage with the mass of grotesque Scavengers, especially because each of them possessed unique shape and abilities. Even with Sunny's power, there was a risk of drowning in the tide of abominations simply for the lack of understanding of them.

Still… he could slow them down a little bit, at least.

The jade blade of the Sin of Solace drew a line across an Awakened Monster's body, seamlessly parting it in two. Sunny was still amazed by the power of the beautiful, cursed sword. It felt so light in his hands that it almost seemed as though they were empty, and cut through the bodies of his enemies so easily as if not meeting any resistance at all.

It felt like he was cutting water with a blade made of air.

Despite its length, the jade jian was incredibly nimble and swift. It almost demanded to be used, to dance gracefully through the air while shedding rivers of blood. For that reason, Sunny had to adjust his technique a little.

The Sin of Solace was comparable to the odachi he had grown accustomed to in terms of sheer size, but it was much lighter. It had a double-edged blade, too, and a sharp point that was perfectly suited for lethal thrusts. Although the foundational mechanics of using the two-handed jian were the same, it was better suited for a more agile, swift, unpredictable, and devious swordplay.

Luckily, Sunny was proficient in using all kinds of weapons and battle styles, weaving them together to achieve the optimal outcome.

…Not that he needed a lot of technical skill to slaughter these pathetic abominations. For these waifs, pure speed was enough.

Severing the first creature in half, he shifted his weight slightly, made a step to the side, and easily beheaded another. This one was a Fallen, so its flesh presented more resistance to the jade blade of the Sin of Solace… however, it was still eerily easy to cut it down.

Black blood rained on the white snow.

By the time Sunny finished off the two stragglers that had broken away from the swarm, the mass of abominations already reached him. Instead of clashing with countless Nightmare Creatures, he simply dissolved into shadows and appeared two dozen meters away, in the midst of them. The Sin of Solace whistled through the air,

reaping another life.

Then, he was gone again.

Just like that, jumping from one abomination to another, Sunny soon reached the heart of the Scavenger mob, where the Gate Guardian towered above the lesser creatures.

The Corrupted Demon… was different from the rest of them. It was taller, stronger, and seemed much more ancient. Most importantly, it filled Sunny with a cold feeling of dread. His intuition was ringing alarm bells, screaming at him that this foe was strong, dangerous, perilous… deadly.

The creature resembled a giant with a body that was covered by pale, strangely organic, bone-like armor. It was littered with deep scars and signs of corrosion, but seemed almost impossible to break. On the Demon's face… or rather, instead of its face… a single bone protrusion extended forward like a vicious horn.

Sunny hesitated for a split second.

'...You're an ugly one, huh?'

Then, there was no time to think. The Demon noticed him almost before Sunny had appeared from the shadows, and brought his devastating fists down, aiming to crush the enemy into a puddle of blood.

Sunny silently cursed and jumped back. The Gate Guardian struck nothing but the cold ground, splitting it open and causing a small earthquake with this single blow.

A powerful shockwave spread from the point of impact, throwing several Nightmare Creatures down. If a mundane human had happened to be nearby, just this shockwave alone would have been enough to rupture their organs, killing them on the spot.

Sunny, fortunately, was not mundane. His armor and Ascended body absorbed the shock, and all he felt was a little rattle. The localized earthquake, nevertheless, was violent enough to throw him to the ground.

'Ah, not good…'

Usually, in a battle against something so powerful, losing his footing would have meant death. A Corrupted Demon was fast enough to unleash a finishing blow long before the enemy managed to get back up and regain their mobility… in this case, however, no attack followed.

The shadows in the place where the creature's fists landed suddenly surged forward and wrapped themselves around its wrists like black shackles. The Gate Guardian tried to straighten and unleash another blow, but was pulled back down by the shadow bindings.

It let out a rambling growl that rolled across the battlefield like an ill omen, and strained its mighty muscles. A moment later, the dark shackles exploded into a myriad of shards, and it was free again.

That moment was all Sunny had needed, though.

Chapter-885: Myriad Eater

Using the short window of opportunity, Sunny jumped back to his feet, dashed forward, and thrust his jade sword into a small crack between two plates of armor that covered the giant's knee joint. The thin blade of the Sin of Solace easily slid into it and bit into the Demon's flesh, drawing a few drops of putrid black blood.

That was all he had time to do before leaping back.

The shallow wound Sunny had delivered was by no means mortal, or even seriously debilitating.

But it didn't need to be.

The plague of the [Sinister Whisper] had already been passed to the Gate Guardian by the swift jade blade.

'Let's see how strong your mind is, bastard.'

Even diminished by the potent mental barrier of the Undying Chain, the eerie whispers of the Sin of Solace were constantly assaulting his own sanity. Of course, it was strange to think of any Nightmare Creature as sane… they were all mad to begin with, after all.

But Sunny had high hopes. A demon was a demon — no matter how wicked, it was still a sentient being. That sentience, which made these creatures so dangerous, could also be destroyed.

The Gate Guardian finally unleashed another attack, this one so fast that Sunny barely had time to react. With no other choice, he gritted his teeth and blocked it with the blade of the Sin of Solace. Another shockwave exploded outward, and he was thrown back like a cannonball.

'Crap…'

Sunny flew back, smashing into several Nightmare Creatures on his way. Several devastating impacts rattled his entire body, and bits of broken flesh flew into the air. Landing dozens of meters away from the Gate Guardian, he collided against the ground, bounced, and then rolled for a bit, leaving a deep groove in the snow.

Throughout all of it, there was a vicious smile on his lips, however. That was because he had managed to deliver a cut to the wrist of the Demon just before his block crumbled.

The giant was already near, so Sunny rose without wasting any time and dashed forward to meet him.

For a short stretch of time which, nevertheless, felt like an eternity, he danced around the Corrupted abomination. Diving through the shadows and using Shadow Manifestation, Sunny was able to just barely stay ahead of the terrifying creature by a split second. Several more shallow wounds appeared on the giant's body, drops of blood rolling down its bone armor.

At first, the Demon did not seem to be affected at all. Then, however…

First, his movements slowed down a little, becoming slightly erratic.

Then, his body grew tense.

The creature twitched and suddenly struck itself in the head, as if trying to shake off a dizzy spell.

The more wounds accumulated on the giant's body, the louder the whispers of the sinister blade grew.

Eventually, the Demon froze in an awkward pose, its arms hanging limp and its neck twisted at a strange angle. It remained motionless for a few long, tense seconds.

Then, a chilling roar escaped from its maw, making the world shake.

'What the…'

As the Gate Guardians sanity… insanity… or whatever it was that

guided its perverse sentience collapsed, an endless sea of bloodlust and frenzy seemed to overwhelm the abomination. Letting out a bestial growl, it moved again and lunged at Sunny like a mountain of muscle, bone, and murderous rage.

Sunny stared at that frightening sight for a short moment, then calmly stepped through shadows and appeared twenty or so meters behind the crazed horror.

His disappearance did not seem to affect the Demon much. Maybe the broken abomination did not even notice it, consumed by rabid madness. The Gate Guardian simply reached its long arms forward, grabbed the nearest Nightmare Creature, and brutally ripped it apart.

Then, not satisfied by the ghastly sight of the ruptured corpse, it howled and dove into the surrounding swarm, crushing and tearing bodies to shreds. Just in a few seconds, the crazed Demon killed more Nightmare Creatures than Sunny had on his way to meet it.

'D—damn…'

Looking at the rampaging Gate Guardian, Sunny couldn't help but shudder. Sin of Solace was truly a frightening weapon.

…Did it only seem so, or had the whispers of the jade blade grown a little clearer?

He really felt like he could learn to understand them. If he just listened a little bit closer… a little bit longer... yes, surely, he would...

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The rest of the battle did not take long. Verne's Awakened and the Devils fought the swarm of Scavengers at the front, while the frenzied Demon decimated its center. Many Nightmare Creatures tried to attack the Gate Guardian to save their lives, but all of them failed.

Sunny did not, however.

Felling a mindless enemy was infinitely easier than a cunning one, and the maddened giant seemed to have lost all its ability to think straight. Being consumed by the curse of the [Sinister Whisper], it

had turned into a rabid beast. Sunny used that to his advantage, pulling the attention of the Corrupted Demon toward other abominations while he methodically worked on dismantling its armor.

The trick was to remain out of sight and only attack the giant from the back. Of course, navigating through the swarm of abominations without being cornered was not an easy task, but the havoc consuming the battlefield was so thorough that Sunny had even less trouble with that task than usual.

Eventually, he bled the Gate Guardian, diminished its power with dozens of cuts, and finally pierced its black, wildly contorting heart.

A few moments later, the voice of the Spell reached his ears through the clamor of battle:

[You have slain a Corrupted Demon, Myriad Eater.]

[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

The giant's corpse crashed to the ground, making it tremble.

Sunny stared at it for a moment, surprised.

A Corrupted Demon… suddenly, he remembered his first moments on the Forgotten Shore, and the monstrous shark that had almost scared him to death. It was a Corrupted creature, too. Either a Demon or a Devil, considering the two soul shards that the Carapace Centurions later harvested from the half of the carcass that a much more harrowing being had left behind.

Who could have thought that, one day, he would be killing abominations comparable to that fearsome monstrosity?

Shaking his head, Sunny brandished the Sin of Solace and looked around.

It was time to clean up the rest of the mess…

Chapter-886: Clean Up

Although Awakened were still fighting the remnants of the Scavenger swarm, the battle was more or less over.

The Gate Guardian was dead, and Verne had handled the other Corrupted abomination with Kim's support. Belle, Dorn, and Samara had hunted down the most dangerous Fallen while the local garrison eradicated the rest. By now, only the weakest Nightmare Creatures remained.

They were still deadly, of course, but the Scavengers did not seem too dangerous unless they were old and had devoured a lot of powerful enemies. The lesser ones even succumbed to their bestial instincts and got distracted from the fight, forgetting everything to sink teeth into the flesh of the slain members of their own kind.

For them, any world was a dog eat dog world.

Sunny prowled the battlefield for a while, searching for Fallen abominations in hopes of earning a shadow fragment or two. Sadly, it seemed that there were none left. The rest of the defenders of LO49 were quite thorough. Eventually, he gave up and joined the soldiers of the garrison in cleaning up the remaining enemies.

What followed was a swift, but tedious chore. They quickly swept the field where the ground was drenched by blood and littered with the revolting corpses, slaughtering the last of the Scavengers.

At some point, Sunny found himself back near the corpse of the Corrupted Demon he had defeated. Since there was nothing much left for him to do, he decided to dig out the soul shards from the massive carcass. With these, both Luster and Kim would probably be able to fully saturate their cores, thus bringing the cohort to its optimal strength.

The other members had long achieved full saturation, leaving only these two. Still, even they were awfully close.

Heading for the dead giant with greed shining in his eyes, Sunny accidentally heard the subdued voices of the Awakened from the local garrison.

"Gods… look at that monstrosity."

"Damn. I heard rumors, of course, but to see it with my own eyes. He really went and killed a Corrupted Demon alone."

"Yeah, it was scary. I couldn't see much, but their battle must have been a fierce one. One third of the whole swarm was destroyed simply because the bastards got caught in the crossfire, can you believe that?"

"...I guess they call him Devil for a reason."

Hiding a small smile, Sunny stepped close to the carcass of the Myriad Eater and raised the Sin of Solace, planning to cut through the tough bone plate on its chest. Then, however, he tilted his head a little.

There were strange sounds coming from the other side of the dead giant.

"Nyam-nyam… crunch… nom-nom… slurp..."

Frowning, he noiselessly jumped on top of the massive corpse and looked down.

There, a tiny Scavenger was greedily biting into the tough flesh of the dead demon. The pathetic creature looked like a gaunt, starved gremlin that was only as tall as Sunny's knee. It had a mouth full of sharp triangular teeth, though, which were doing a surprisingly good job of tearing into the Corrupted corpse.

'Huh. I guess even Nightmare Creatures have runts.'

As Sunny watched, the little imp tore a piece of bloody meat off with its teeth, raised its head, and swallowed the chunk of its former

master's flesh with an excited snarl.

…It was then that the vermin noticed the human looking at him from above.

Perhaps because of the [Omen of Dread] enchantment of the Sin of Solace, or perhaps because the adolescent abomination had enough brain to feel terror in front of a superior predator, its eyes widened in fear.

The tiny Scavenger froze for a moment…

Then, it shrieked and dashed away from the carcass of the Myriad Eater, trying to run away.

Sunny blinked.

'Well, that's a first.'

Since he didn't want to waste essence on Shadow Manifestation, he simply summoned the Prowling Thorn. By the time the heavy kunai manifested itself into his hand, the vile critter was already far away.

Not bothered too much, Sunny aimed and sent the kunai flying. The Scavenger was a split second away from dying, but at the last moment, it tripped and pathetically tumbled down. As a result, the blade of the kunai only sliced two fingers off its hand.

Sunny scowled and pulled on the invisible string, summoning the Prowling Thorn back to throw it again. This time, he wasn't going to miss…

Suppressing the whispers of the Sin of Solace and the oppressive pull of the Call, he banished every other thought away and concentrated solely on the tiny figure of the fleeing imp.

It was then that someone said, in a tone of cold disdain:

"Fool."

Sunny flinched and looked around.

'Huh? Who said that?'

Although the familiar voice sounded as if it came from somewhere very close by, there was no one else around.

Come to think of it… Sunny knew that voice very well. It was his own voice.

Confused, he scratched the back of his head with the tip of the Prowling Thorn.

'Was that an intrusive thought?'

Because of the sudden distraction, the wounded Scavenger was getting farther and farther away.

…More importantly, though, Sunny's concentration was broken. All the information he had been ignoring to make a good throw flooded into his mind.

His eyes widened.

'Professor!'

Sunny flinched and turned around, staring in the direction of the research installation.

There, deep below one of the science buildings, around a hundred civilians were locked in a heavily reinforced shelter, nervously waiting for the soldiers of the garrison to announce that it was safe to come out.

Professor Obel and his assistant, Beth, were among them.

There was also another person in the shelter… someone who had been quietly sitting in a dark corner.

Dozing off…

Until a few seconds ago.

'No, no, no…'

Sunny jumped off the Demon's corpse and dove into the shadows, stepping through them to appear in the shelter.

However, he knew that he wouldn't be able to appear there in time.

A few moments was more than enough for the worst to happen.

…So, he made a swift decision.

In the short moment that it took him to complete the shadow step, a sharp pain suddenly pierced his very being.

Chapter-887: Lapse of Judgment

It only took Sunny a split second to understand what had happened. One of the scientists locked in the shelter had fallen asleep… in their sleep, that person had been pulled into the First Nightmare.

And died.

Perhaps the trial of the Spell was especially harsh, or perhaps the scientist was especially weak. Perhaps luck was simply not on their side. In the end, it did not matter.

What mattered was that the Seed of Nightmare in their soul bloomed, and a deadly abomination was unleashed into the waking world.

Crimson blood on the white lab coat. A grotesque figure that resembled a ghastly amalgamation of a human and a monstrous mannequin made of flesh. Screams of fear, eyes full of shock. Even though the Nightmare Creature had just been born, it already unleashed its murderous madness on the defenseless civilians in the shelter.

Everyone was late to react — the automated defense systems, the sentries posted in the bunker… even Sunny himself.

Although he was already diving into the shadows, he knew that the short moment it would take him to travel the vast distance between the bloodsoaked battlefield and the shelter could mean the difference between life and death for Professor Obel.

Summoning Saint was a fast affair, but it, too, took a second or two to complete.

So, he went for a measure that would be immediate… using Shadow Manifestation, he commanded the shadow that had been observing the old scientist to assume a tangible form and resist the frenzied

Nightmare Creature.

Almost instantly, a sharp pain pierced his very being. The shadow sustained damage, which meant that his soul did, too.

…No matter how many times Sunny had endured soul attacks, the sheer agony of them was still a shock.

A single heartbeat later, he rolled out of the shadows nestling in the corners of the underground shelter and looked around, trying to evaluate the situation through the pain.

It had been only several seconds since the unfortunate scientist turned into a grotesque abomination. Still, several people that had been close to the transformed monstrosity were already dead. Their severed limbs littered the floor, which was slick with blood.

The creature itself was lunging at a group of terrified civilians, among whom were the dazed Professor and Beth. The young woman was trying to shield the old man with her body, which was useless, considering that the creature would not be slowed down at all by her fragile mundane flesh. Screams of horror filled the air…

However, the abomination seemed to be stuck in place.

That was because an arrogant shadow was standing between the monstrosity and the scientist, pushing it back with a hand. Its other hand was wrapped around a bone scythe that had pierced the shadow's side, preventing it from cutting deeper.

Unlike Sunny himself, the shadow did not show any sign of being in pain… well, of course! The haughty bastard was utterly above breaking decorum because of a small and inconsequential thing like being skewered by a Nightmare Creature's blade. More than that, it would never stoop so low as to show weakness or discomfort in front of its lessers.

…Which was everyone. Everyone in two worlds was, naturally, its lesser.

'That guy…'

Right then, the haughty shadow raised one leg and kicked the abomination in the abdomen, sending it stumbling back. Then, it disappeared, turning back into a black silhouette on the floor. Its job was already done.

Jumping over a body of one of the killed scientist, Sunny flashed through the underground shelter and attacked the Nightmare Creature before it could regain its balance. The Sin of Solace passed through the abomination without meeting almost any resistance, and then, the grisly mutant silently fell to the ground.

It was only then that the sentries managed to raise their rifles, and the turrets mounted on the ceiling came to life, swinging in the direction of the dismantled abomination.

Sunny had been faster than all of them.

[You have slain an Awakened monster, Bone Slayer.]

But still… still…

Standing above the dead creature, Sunny scowled, a dark expression appearing on his face.

He had missed it. He had been distracted, and lost awareness of what was happening around him.

That was not like Sunny.

'How did this happen?'

He had been keeping an eye on the Professor even while fighting the Myriad Eater, but then, at some point… his attention was drawn elsewhere.

Was it because of the Call? Was it because of the Sin of Solace? Or simply because of the accumulated exhaustion of having to fight intense battles one after another? A combination of all these reasons?

In any case, Sunny was not happy with himself. The pain lingering in his wounded soul served as a reminder of his failure. He had killed a Corrupted Demon and won the battle, but almost failed his mission.

Countless people had almost died.

With a grim sigh, Sunny dismissed the jade sword and the helmet of the Undying Chain, revealing his pale face and hair, which was damp with sweat. Then, he looked around one more time, counting the dead and observing the fearful expressions of those who survived.

'Six victims, in just a few seconds. It could have been much, much worse.'

Despite this conclusion, he couldn't help but be appalled by the gruesome sight of the severed corpses laying on the floor. It was rotten luck, for an Awakened Monster to appear as a result of a failed First Nightmare.

"M—master Sunless! You're here!"

One of the soldiers called out to him, still aiming at the unmoving abomination.

Sunny exhaled slowly, then looked at Professor Obel, making sure that he was okay. Beth was still shielding him, slow to realize that the threat had been dealt with.

"...Yeah. You can lower your rifles. It's dead."

He lingered for a moment, and then addressed the terrified crowd of civilians:

"Someone failed their First Nightmare, so… but it is over now. The battle upstairs is over, too. We won. You should all be safe now."

'...For now.'

Of course, he did not say that last part aloud. Instead, Sunny stared at the bodies once again and gritted his teeth. This was the first time when a victory felt so bitter. In fact, despite having killed one of his most powerful foes yet, Sunny did not feel like he had won anything at all.

Things were getting worse and worse with each day.

A week… two weeks…

How many more people would die before the Ariadne arrived to take them all away?

Standing in a puddle of blood with hundreds of frightened civilians looking at him with gratitude and relief, Sunny had no answer.

Chapter-888: Vanishing

After cleaning up the unexpected Gate, things settled down within the walls of LO49. For the next few days, Sunny and his cohort did not have a lot to do — they just had to rest, remain vigilant… and above all else, stay awake.

That task turned out surprisingly hard for Sunny. As an Ascended, he should have had no problem with keeping himself from falling asleep for a couple of weeks. However, because of the damage his soul had sustained, he felt weak and strangely lethargic.

Sunny was not under the same pressure as the Awakened stationed at the research facility. He could allow himself to fall asleep without traveling to the Dream Realm, but doing so while his soldiers were struggling to keep themselves awake did not seem like something that a good leader and a man of conviction would do.

Additionally, he had an unreasonable feeling that the moment he closed his eyes, something was going to go horribly wrong.

Minutes and hours passed with an excruciating slowness, but his mental exhaustion did not seem to diminish with the passage of time. Instead, it only grew, aggravated by the insidious pressure of the Call.

Of course, soul wounds were not permanent. They healed naturally over time, and that one in particular was not even the worst one Sunny had ever received. The haughty shadow, too, was on its way to full recovery. The other shadows fussed around it a lot, but the arrogant guy pretended to not care.

Secretly, though, he seemed to be enjoying all the attention.

'Don't sleep, don't sleep, don't sleep…'

On top of the wall overseeing the dark ocean, Sunny pressed his

forehead against the lip of the wall, and then lightly struck his head against it several times.

'Ah, how annoying.'

There was nothing useful for him to do in the research facility, which only aggravated the dangerous feeling of boredom. They were disconnected from the network, which meant that he could not access any entertainment or receive messages from Rain. They could not travel to the Dream Realm, making the tiresome isolation complete.

Of course, he could immerse himself in all kinds of interesting endeavors. Sunny could continue his experiments with weaving, or hold an engaging conversation with Professor Obel… he could go and check how much Luster and Kim had improved after saturating their cores…

But all of that demanded mental strain, which would only make him more tired.

That damned ship couldn't arrive any sooner…

As he was resentfully contemplating the situation, a lone figure ascended the wall and approached him. It was Beth, who seemed to be searching for Sunny, for some reason. She was wearing a long parka on top of the usual lab coat.

He looked at her bleakly, and asked:

"What?"

She glowered.

"What do you mean, "what"? Can't I look at the ocean, too?"

Sunny stared at her for a moment, then turned away.

"Be my guest."

The young woman remained silent for a while. After a minute or two passed in silence, she said awkwardly:

"Anyway… about what happened that time… I guess you are not completely useless. For a Master."

Sunny smiled with a corner of his mouth.

"...Is this your way of saying thank you?"

Beth looked down, but then answered with unexpected sincerity:

"Yes. I mean… thank you. From me and all the other scientists. If it wasn't for you… Professor might have…"

He studied the black waves silently.

"Don't thank me. If I did my job well, that wouldn't have happened, in the first place. I was negligent."

The young woman suddenly scoffed, ruining the somber mood.

"Gosh! How cool. You are very full of yourself, aren't you, Master Sunless?"

Sunny simply grinned.

"Naturally. Who else am I going to be full of?"

Beth sighed.

"Still… you are a human, too. Awakened often seem to forget that fact, so don't be too hard on yourself. Just keep the Professor alive. That is enough."

He nodded.

"...That's the plan."

With that, she lingered for a few moments, and then left him alone.

Sunny stared into the distance, imagining the formidable silhouette of the battleship appearing on the horizon.

'When I get out of this place, I'm going to sleep for a week straight. Argh, no… don't think about sleep… sleep… sleep…'

He grimaced, then slapped himself and turned around. It was time to go and find himself a cup of strong, bitter coffee…

The next morning, which was no different from the evening, a familiar figure approached the Rhino. Sunny, who was sitting on its roof and fiddling with a stimulator patch, looked down and raised his eyebrow.

"Verne? Did something happen?"

The tall Ascended looked up and remained silent for a few moments. There were dark circles under his calm, weary eyes.

"...Yes. Something happened."

Sunny frowned, suddenly feeling uneasy.

"Well, what is it?"

Verne sighed.

"One of my soldiers is missing."

***

The missing soldier had disappeared from the living quarters in the middle of the night. The man's absence was noticed in the morning, when he failed to assume his post.

He was one of the hundred Awakened of the local garrison, an experienced warrior who had been on track to becoming an officer. Tardiness was not in his nature.

As Sunny and Verne walked toward the building where the soldier had resided, there was a tense atmosphere around them. Sunny was asking the obvious questions:

"Have you searched the facility?"

The other Master nodded.

"Yes, every area that he could have access to. There is no sign of him

anywhere."

Sunny frowned. People did not just vanish into thin air… well, usually, they didn't… especially with no one noticing.

"What about security cameras? Did they record anything?"

Verne gritted his teeth, then shook his head.

"Most of the observation system went down during the blizzard. What little remains is almost useless because of the interference from the Scavenger Gate. There are no recordings that we can use."

They arrived at the barracks and proceeded to the missing soldier's personal room, in front of which a few Awakened were already crowding with worried expressions on their faces.

Walking inside, Sunny felt his unease growing stronger.

That was because there was… nothing.

Nothing in the small room said that something had happened there. There were no signs of a struggle, no drops of blood, no unusual smells lingering in the air. Even with his special eyes and unnatural intuition, he could not notice anything out of the ordinary.

Still, Sunny made a point of studying every small detail, both with his vision and Shadow Sense. He sent his shadows to sweep through the facility, too… with no result whatsoever.

The soldier had, indeed, somehow vanished into thin air.

After a while, Sunny looked at Verne and asked a somewhat awkward question:

"Could he have… deserted?"

Verne stared at him blankly.

"...Where would he go?"

Sunny nodded. Even if someone had lost their mind and decided to

run away from the remote station, there was nowhere for them to go.

The other Master, meanwhile, gritted his teeth.

"I hoped that you would be able to notice something that I missed. Have you found anything?"

Sunny remained silent for a while. Eventually, he sighed tiredly and shook his head.

"No. Nothing…"

Chapter-889: Without a Trace

The Awakened warrior was simply gone. The whole facility was swept, both by the soldiers of the garrison and Sunny's shadows, but no trace of him was found. Verne even made the decision to unseal the dome of the old observatory. However, there was nothing but old equipment, darkness, and dust inside.

Sunny then sent his shadows to scour the coastal plain outside the fortress, hoping to discover a clue. He did not.

A sense of unease and foreboding spread through the isolated fortress.

As people were crowding together to alleviate this tension, Sunny, Verne, and Professor Obel gathered in the security center to have an emergency discussion. However, none of them seemed too eager to speak first.

They simply had nothing to say.

Eventually, Sunny rubbed his face with a sigh.

"Well, there are only three possibilities, right?"

Verne looked at him darkly.

"And they are?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"First… he might have really deserted."

The stern Master simply shook his head. There was no hostility or defensiveness in this gesture, since Verne was not the type of leader to be insecure about his people or himself. He did not have the kind of fragile pride that would make the statement sound offensive.

"That is improbable. I know this Awakened very well. He was… is a stalwart man."

Sunny moved on with a shrug.

"Still, that would be the best outcome. The other two possibilities are much more troublesome."

A tired frown appeared on his face.

"The second possibility is that he was killed, for whatever reason, by another person stationed at LO49. The killer subsequently disposed of the body and removed the signs of the crime. Considering that it is not easy for a mundane human to kill an Awakened, the most likely suspect would be one of your people, Verne."

Professor Obel let out a heavy sigh.

"Surely, you don't think that one of these brave soldiers…"

Sunny looked at him with a somber expression.

"I am just exploring what could have happened. However, don't be mistaken. We Awakened are always only one step away from turning into monsters. With how much pressure Antarctica exerts on people... many will inevitably start to break. In any case, we should pay attention to those Awakened that have Aspects suitable for getting rid of incriminating evidence.

Verne, you know your soldiers best, so this task will be on you."

Verne pursed his lips, but then silently nodded.

"What about the last possibility?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments.

"There might be a Nightmare Creature that has infiltrated the facility and is now hiding somewhere within these walls. Considering that we failed to find any traces at all… it has to be either very powerful, very elusive, or both. Since I am the best scout among us, investigating this possibility will be my task."

Verne remained silent for a while, then said somberly:

"That sounds like a plan. However, what happens if neither of us discovers anything?"

Sunny looked at him. His eyes were full of darkness.

"Then we just need to wait for the Ariadne to arrive and hope that no one else disappears. According to the last communication we had with the outside, it will reach us in four days at the earliest, and in eleven at the latest. Surely, we can hold out for that long."

As he spoke, the persistent noise of the Call kept scratching, pressing, seeping into his mind.

Verne closed his eyes for a moment.

"Then, that is what we will do."

***

Verne started investigating his own soldiers, while Sunny climbed back on top of the Rhino and sent his shadows to explore LO49 for the third time that day. He had little hope of finding anything, but the thought of an elusive, uncanny horror hiding somewhere within the confines of the fortress, waiting to snatch its next victim, prevented him from remaining idle.

At least he had something to do now.

People locked inside the facility had already been tense and exhausted, but with a new, unknown threat looming somewhere just out of sight, their moods grew even more bleak and unstable. Most held up fine, for now, due to the hope of the Ariadne arriving soon.

Sunny knew all about hope and how important it was in situations like these.

While the search went on, new safety protocols went in effect. Mundane humans were prohibited from remaining alone, and a mutual responsibility system was established to keep anyone from succumbing to the First Nightmare unexpectedly. Living quarters

were fitted with additional sensors and alarm locks, Awakened were supplied with powerful stimulants to remain awake, and so on.

Many soldiers were pulled off the walls to reinforce internal patrols and make sure that the protocols were followed.

There was no established tradition of dealing with a crisis like this, since the Chain of Nightmares had changed the rules of the game. Cut off from Army Command, Verne was forced to come up with enhanced measures on his own. Luckily, Professor Obel was able to help out.

The old man still had memories of the cataclysmic descent of the Spell, and of how the First Generation had dealt with similar problems.

Isolated from the outside world and surrounded by an unknown number of active Gates, LO49 was holding on as best as it could.

But was it good enough? Sunny did not know.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it...'

To his frustration, he failed to find any proof that an unknown Nightmare Creature was hiding somewhere in the settlement. His shadows had explored every corner of the fortress, both above and below the ground, as well as many kilometers of the snow-covered coastal plain beyond the walls. But all of it was to no avail.

Either the abomination was too cunning, possessed truly frightening powers, or it simply did not exist.

Verne failed to discover anything, as well.

At some point, Sunny found himself studying the spot where his cohort and the garrison of LO49 had defeated the Scavengers. Two of his shadows were sniffing around the battlefield, one was studying the distant Gate, and one was keeping an eye on Professor Obel.

'...Maybe that soldier really just ran away. I looked everywhere. There's just no sign, of anything.'

He was almost ready to believe that theory.

It was then that a tall figure approached the Rhino. Sunny shivered in the cold and walked to the edge of the APC's roof, then looked down on Verne, experiencing a sense of déjà vu. His heart suddenly fell.

"What happened?"

Verne stared at him with a dim expression. A few long moments later, he opened his mouth and said in an even voice:

"...Three more people have vanished."

Chapter-890: Mutual Responsibility

Three more people gone, and zero new clues were found. This time, the vanished were not Awakened. One was a mundane soldier, one was a scientist, and one was a member of the civilian support staff. They did not have anything particular in common, no thread that connected them together or to the first victim. All three vanished from different locations, and had been last seen at different times.

Sunny and Verne silently investigated their living quarters, the areas they had been known to frequent in the settlement, and their last known locations. They did not find anything.

In the process, both of them grew more and more somber.

...At some point, Sunny threw a suspicious look at the other Master. What did he really know about Verne? Verne was a local of Antarctica, a career serviceman with a stellar record, a competent fighter, and a leader that was loved and respected by his men. His Aspect centered around heat transference and physical augmentation.

Not exactly something that could have been used to dispose of bodies… but then again, who said that it had to be done with an Aspect Ability?

Almost at the same time, Verne suddenly glanced at Sunny with his usual stoic expression. His eyes, however, were cold and heavy.

"I heard that you have a spatial storage Memory."

Sunny looked at him darkly.

"...So what if I do?"

Verne held his gaze for a few long moments, then turned away with a sigh.

"This is not good."

Sunny had to agree.

If the two of them were already paranoid enough to suspect each other, then the rest of the installation residents had to really be on edge.

A bit of vigilance was never a bad thing, but with how pressured people already felt, one additional burden could become a spark that had the potential to cause a violent explosion.

He sighed.

"We have to… be ready to implement measures."

Verne gave him a sideways glance.

"What kind of measures?"

Sunny stared at him calmly… or coldly, even.

…He was so tired.

"Whatever kind that works."

The other Master remained silent for a while.

"I am confident in my people. Even exhausted and sleep-deprived, they will remain disciplined. The civilians, however… that might be a challenge. However, the best way to resolve this issue is to prevent it from happening in the first place. For that, we need to understand what is going on and stop more people from disappearing."

Sunny lingered for a few moments. Eventually, he shrugged.

"Yeah... let's hope that we will."

With that, they moved to the next item on the agenda — interviewing the witnesses.

Perhaps "witnesses" was the wrong word. This time, all three victims were mundanes. That meant that they had been assigned a partner by the updated safety protocols that Verne had established. They had not been supposed to remain alone at any point, not to mention long enough to vanish without a trace.

And yet, they had.

The interviews did not reveal anything substantial. The mutual responsibility partners of the three victims reported the same thing… the vanished had been with them throughout the day, but at some point disappeared, completely unnoticed.

The scientist and the staff member had been gone by the time their partners woke up, and the soldier seemed to have vanished while his comrade turned away to concentrate on servicing one of the wall turrets.

It was after the remaining soldier had reported his partner's absence that the fact that two more people were missing was discovered.

None of the three victims had been acting strangely or revealed any discomfort prior to their vanishing. There was simply nothing for Sunny and Verne to catch, no thread they could pull to unravel the whole mystery.

Their moods grew darker and darker.

…While they were interviewing the witnesses, there were two deaths inside the settlement. One was a scientist that had reported symptoms of being infected by the Spell a day prior, was confined to a secure room in the installation's medical center, and quietly passed away in her sleep.

Several Awakened monitoring the situation dispatched the Nightmare Creature that the dead scientist had turned into, preventing the repeat of the safe room massacre.

The other was a staff member that had been so afraid to fall asleep that he stole a batch of military stimulants from the same medical center. Inevitably, these stimulants, developed for Awakened soldiers,

had put too much strain on his body. The man collapsed and swiftly died of acute heart failure in front of dozens of frightened civilians.

Sunny and Verne received the report about the deaths right after finishing the fruitless interviews.

A heavy silence settled in the empty room, where only the two of them remained.

Eventually, Verne gritted his teeth.

"...This is all a bit suffocating, isn't it?"

The local Master looked weary, but still composed and resolute.

Sunny leaned back on his chair, tiredly thinking of the soft bed that was waiting for him inside the Rhino.

"Yes. There are very few things that are more suffocating than powerlessness. You get used to it, though."

Verne grimaced.

"If the two of us feel powerless, then how do the rest of them feel?"

He was quiet for a bit, and then asked:

"Three days. That is when the ship will arrive, right?"

Sunny silently shook his head.

"Don't expect the Ariadne to arrive at the earliest opportunity. Naval navigation is not easy. It's better to plan for the worst."

…Soon, Verne made an announcement reiterating the importance of the updated safety measures and ordering all personnel at LO49 to follow them to the letter, as well as introducing stricter measures of mutual responsibility.

People were forced to always stay in groups, mark their comings and goings in special ledgers, share cramped living quarters, and were confined to areas of the settlement that had to do with their direct

responsibilities. They couldn't even visit the bathroom on their own.

More soldiers had to leave their posts on the walls of the fortress to saturate the patrol schedule and stand guard inside the buildings. Every Awakened with an Aspect suitable for scouting was put to work monitoring the interior of the settlement. Verne himself oversaw what little of the observation system was still functioning. Sunny's shadows kept watch at key points of LO49.

But despite all that…

Throughout the next day, six more people went missing.

Chapter-891: Fatigue

Six people vanished. There were still no traces. It seemed that the killer — whoever or whatever the killer was — did not care if the person was alone or in a group. The mutual responsibility system was not working. Everyone was scared.

The next day, seven people vanished. Four of them were experienced Awakened, some of the best soldiers Verne had. The other three were scientists. On the same day, two more mundanes succumbed to the Spell. One of them died and was eliminated, the other was still struggling somewhere out there, in the First Nightmare. Perhaps that person would become a Sleeper soon.

A day after that, twelve people vanished. No clues were found, and fear continued to spread through the facility like a plague. It had yet to transform into panic, but the residents of LO49 were starting to grow restless, trapped in the suffocating atmosphere of dread, exhaustion, and doubt.

Sunny really wanted to sleep.

Then, the day that the Ariadne could have arrived came. People were uplifted a little by the excitement, but Sunny did not share in their enthusiasm. He expected the rescue to reach them no sooner than after another week. A lot of things could happen in a week.

...The Ariadne did not arrive, but a horde of Nightmare Creatures appeared instead, descending from the mountains. It seemed that things were not going well up north, considering that such a large swarm of abominations had been allowed to assemble and travel freely. What was the army even doing?

Isolated at the edge of the world, they had no way of knowing.

The battle was long and fierce, but ended in a decisive victory. The

tired soldiers retreated back into the fortress without even bothering to burn the corpses. They would be covered by the snow soon, anyway.

Everyone felt the growing fatigue.

The mundane person who had been making their way through the First Nightmare woke up as a Sleeper.

…The next day, that Sleeper disappeared, along with fourteen more people.

The Scavenger Gate released a new wave of abominations. There were just a handful of them, so Sunny slaughtered the Nightmare Creatures himself before anyone else had time to arrive.

On his way back, he noticed that many of the carcasses laying under a thin veil of fresh snow seemed to be missing large chunks of flesh.

Sunny was too tired to care.

'I should sleep. There's nothing preventing me from sleeping. In fact, it is detrimental to remain awake. I'll think better if I rest.'

But that was not true. Despite his exhaustion, Sunny's mind seemed to only become sharper. He had lost a bit of situational awareness and reaction speed, but was now able to enter a state of being laser focused on something in exchange. He was also extremely calm, almost as if lacking the energy to feel anxious or agitated.

His mind was… clear.

That evening, Sunny was standing on the southern wall of the fortress, looking at the undulating black ocean. The cold waves rustled as they washed over the stone expanse of the beach, carrying pieces of ice. The wind was howling, and the full moon shone in the dark sky, surrounded by an ethereal scarlet aurora.

The Ariadne was somewhere out there, illuminated by the same moon.

After some time, a lumbering figure climbed the wall and approached

him. Dorn looked as tired as the rest of them. However, the giant man seemed to be holding up comparatively well.

Sunny turned and looked at him.

"Captain… I have an idea. Can I share it?"

He nodded silently. Dorn hesitated for a few moments, and then said:

"Well, it's about the bodies. By now, we have explored every millimeter of this facility. We have searched the coastal plain extensively, too. You probably swept it all countless times. And yet, we did not find even a single drop of blood."

The large man leaned on the lip of the wall.

"It seems that we have searched everywhere, but actually, there is one place where we did not look. Since the bodies are not anywhere else, they had to be in that place... in the water. That is the only logical conclusion."

The black waves continued to sway, indifferent to his words. The unfathomable ocean remained the unchanged.

Sunny was silent for a while, and then nodded.

"...Yeah. That is my thinking, too. So, I'll be keeping a close eye on the beach."

Somewhere in the base, one of his shadows was on its usual patrol. Gliding past a personnel lounge, it noticed Luster, who was sitting on a couch with a glassy look in his eyes. The young man seemed to be on the verge of dozing off.

The shadow momentarily turned tangible and looked at him with disdainful reproach. Then, it slapped him across the face and disappeared.

Luster jumped to his feet and looked around in shock.

"What?! Who?! What… ouch, it hurts!"

Back on the wall, a pale smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"Dorn… that mutual responsibility protocol. You guys start following it, too. Make pairs and watch each other."

Dorn nodded, lingered for a few moments, and then left.

Sunny continued staring at the ocean.

'This doesn't make sense. Even if the killer disposes of the bodies by throwing them into the water, someone would have noticed something. Dozens of people vanished already. All of it is very strange…'

While he was thinking, two more people ascended the wall. One of them was an Awakened soldier, and the other one was a scientist.

Sunny turned around and looked at them with a confused look on his face. Since he was standing close to the ladder, the newcomers had no choice but to bump into him. Sunny remained motionless for a few seconds, then took a step back to make way.

The Awakened and the scientist calmly approached the lip of the wall, climbed over it, and jumped down. One of them landed well, but the other hit the rocks and silently fell. A disturbing sound of breaking bones could be heard, carried by the wind.

Sunny rubbed his face and continued to study the ocean.

The Awakened walked toward the waves, while the scientist crawled. Because of that, the soldier reached the water first. He stepped into it without a hint of hesitation. Soon, the freezing water reached his knees, then his waist. Then, his chest.

Finally, the Awakened disappeared beneath the undulating black surface, and drowned.

At that time, the scientist had crawled far enough to reach the edge of the water. His figure silently vanished into the cold waves, as well.

Nothing remained of the two.

Standing atop the wall, Sunny calmly looked at the ocean.

'...huh? What was I thinking about? Ah, yes… it is strange that no one had seen anything. How do the bodies get dumped into the ocean without anyone noticing?'

He did not know. Maybe his theory was wrong, and the killer had not been using the water to hide the corpses.

The water… it surely looked inviting. Suddenly, Sunny felt a strange urge to go for a swim.

A moment later, he shivered.

'A swim? What am I, crazy? Who swims in the freezing water, during the winter, in Antarctica of all places?'

Shaking his head, Sunny continued to stand watch above the beach. He had not seen anything suspicious yet… but if he remained vigilant, he would surely discover something soon…

Chapter-892: Futility

Sunny remained on the southern wall for two days, silently staring at the ocean. In the meantime, thirty-six people vanished. Some of them were Awakened, and some of them were mundane. Despite safety measures growing more and more draconian, Verne had failed to prevent the disappearances. It was all futile.

And deeply, eerily frightening.

The stern Master came to talk to Sunny at some point, but left more frustrated than he had been before.

The fortress withstood another attack from a transient swarm of Nightmare Creatures. Just like the previous one, it came from the north. This time, Sunny did not participate in the battle, choosing instead to remain where he was. There were a few casualties.

The Awakened soldiers were all exhausted after remaining awake for more than a week. The stimulant patches were gradually losing their effectiveness. The mundane soldiers were better rested, but much more disturbed. They were all wary of the Nightmare Spell.

The civilians… were both exhausted and afraid. They had not been trained to withstand this kind of stress, and the seemingly unknowable nature of the vanishings was pushing them to the verge of panic. If not for the sense of order established and enforced by Verne's protocols and the hope of the Aridane's nearing arrival, they would have come completely undone by now.

The rescue ship was supposed to arrive in three or four days.

…Sunny silently looked at the water, deep in thought.

Hearing light steps, he glanced sideways and saw Beth, who was shivering in the cold as she approached him.

"Hey… Master Sunless."

He frowned.

"Hey."

The young woman looked at him silently for a while, then gritted her teeth.

"What are you doing? You've been stuck on this wall for days! You even ignored the last attack!"

Sunny tilted his head a little. When he responded, his voice sounded a bit strange:

"I'm investigating."

Beth stared at him in disbelief.

"You… you are doing nothing and expect me to believe that it's all a part of the investigation? Please! Both you and Verne have turned out to be completely useless! So many people are gone, and the two of you failed to produce even a tiny clue!"

At that moment, another person appeared on the wall. It was a mature woman in a white lab coat, with a tranquil expression on her face. Both of them moved to let her pass, not paying any attention as the woman silently climbed over the lip and jumped down. The undulating darkness of the ocean reflected in her eyes.

Sunny frowned slightly at the sound of a body hitting the rocks down below and shook his head, instantly forgetting about it.

"Believe what you want."

Beth glowered at him for a bit, then sighed and turned away.

"...Sorry. It doesn't matter, anyway. We just need to persevere for a few more days, until help arrives. But… you promised to protect the Professor. And yet, you left him alone to sit on this wall. That is unacceptable."

'Gods, how devoted can she be? Professor this, professor that… can't that girl think about herself for once? She's in danger, too!'

He rolled his eyes.

"Who says I left him alone? Beth… I've been watching Professor Obel and you twenty-four hours a day, every day, since this whole mess started."

She blinked.

"Uh… what? How?"

Sunny scoffed.

"My first specialty is scouting. Wherever my shadows go, my gaze follows. One of them had been keeping an eye on the Professor, so… how do you think I was able to get to the safe room so fast, when you were attacked?"

Beth looked at him for a bit. Then, suddenly, her cheeks turned red.

"T—twenty-four hours a day? What kind of a creep…"

Sunny palmed his face.

"Gods! Get over yourself. Do you think I have time to spy on mundane girls while all this crap is going on? The point is, Professor Obel is as safe as I can make him."

At that point, another person climbed to the top of the wall and jumped down. Neither of them spared them a single look, although Sunny seemed to shiver a little.

Beth opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again. After a long pause, she finally forced out a few words:

"Well… fine. I guess I'll be going, then."

Sunny nodded.

"Alright."

Then, he suddenly called out to her:

"Wait… do you know my soldiers? There's a big guy called Dorn. Can you ask him to come here?"

Beth frowned, then nodded and hurriedly walked away, hoping to get away from the cold as soon as possible. Sunny sighed.

Soon, Dorn arrived. After understanding what his captain needed, he disappeared, and returned some time later carrying recording equipment. These cameras were a bit old, but that was exactly what made them more reliable than the more modern ones.

Together, they installed the cameras on the wall and stared at the screen of the terminal the recording equipment was connected to.

One more day passed. Twenty people vanished.

Their passage was easily recorded by the cameras, but while Sunny and Dorn were studying the recordings, they didn't seem to notice anything strange about it.

One of Verne's Awakened soldiers fainted, or maybe simply fell asleep while standing at his post. Although chances of his anchor breaking were not high, that was exactly what happened. The soldier did not return from the Dream Realm after eight hours passed, or even sixteen. Some time later, his body went through an almost imperceptible, but eerie and frightening change.

He had become Hollow.

His body was placed in a closed room in the medical center.

Several members of the civilian staff got into a violent fight, but were dragged away from each other by the sentries, isolated, and injected with sedatives.

A stray Nightmare Creature wandered close to the fortress, and was torn apart by a rain of bullets. The thunderous noise of firing turrets made everyone inside the facility shudder.

Another day passed. Twenty-two people vanished.

The moon was gone, but Sunny and Dorn were still on the wall overseeing the ocean.

Standing there, Sunny looked at the dark waves, then at the screen showing the feed from the cameras… then back at the cold black water.

Finally, he scratched the back of his head, pulled the memory storage device from the terminal and turned to Dorn.

"...We're done here. Let's go."

Not waiting for a response, he turned around and headed in the direction of the security center. As Sunny walked through the settlement, many people looked at him. Some of them seemed frightened, some of them seemed angry. Some were simply numb.

Everyone was exhausted.

Arriving at the security center, Sunny found Verne and Professor Obel sitting in silence with dark, tired expressions on their faces. The old man looked even more fragile and ancient than usual.

Sunny placed the memory storage on the table in front of them.

Verne stared at it for a moment, then looked up.

"Why are you here?"

Sunny sat down and rubbed his hands together to warm them. A dark, ominous smile appeared on his lips.

"...My investigation is complete. I know why people are vanishing."

Chapter-893: Negative Space

Verne and Professor Obel were suddenly very focused on his words. Even Dorn, who had spent the last two days on the wall with Sunny, seemed to shake off his fatigue and paid rapt attention to what his captain had to say.

Sunny shut his eyes for a moment.

"When the first victim vanished, I said that there were only three possibilities — that he had deserted, that he had been killed by another human, and that a Nightmare Creature had infiltrated the facility. Well… I was wrong. None of these theories were correct. The third one was the closest to the truth, though."

He sighed.

"There is indeed a Nightmare Creature. Only it is not inside the fortress."

Verne frowned, looking at him with dark intensity.

"What do you mean?"

Sunny lingered for a bit before answering.

"The answer is almost obvious when you consider two things, and then put them together. First, the bodies. People don't just vanish without a trace, and yet we failed to find anything — not at LO49, and not on the coastal plain beyond the wall. So, the most obvious answer is that the bodies are being taken to somewhere where we can't find them… into the water.

There is a whole ocean out there, after all."

Verne wanted to say something, but remained silent at the end,

waiting for Sunny to continue. Sunny nodded.

"The second thing is the Call. Its strength had a qualitative change on the day we fought the Scavengers… too drastic of a change, really, to be produced by a single Gate. Especially one as unimpressive as that. I remember being convinced that there were two, at least, before exploring the plain and finding just one. I even said that we were lucky."

He stared at them for a moment, and then shook his head.

"However, we were not lucky. And there was, indeed, another Gate… one more powerful than the Scavenger Gate that we cleared. We just did not find it."

Professor Obel did not seem to follow his reasoning. That was only to be expected, considering that the old man did not experience the Call himself. Verne, however… finally, a hint of understanding appeared on his face.

"A second Gate… water… you think that there is another Gate? That opened underwater?"

Sunny nodded.

"I am more or less convinced that there is. And that is the reason why people are vanishing."

Verne shook his head.

"That doesn't entirely explain it all. Yes, we have pulled a lot of soldiers off the walls to augment internal patrols, but the ocean is still being watched. Nothing would have been able to crawl from beneath the waves, grab people inside the facility, and drag them back into the water unnoticed."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"...I was just about to get to that."

He rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"Right... we are all under a mind hex. That is why no one noticed anything."

Professor Obel, Verne, and Dorn looked at him with confusion. Finally, the old man asked:

"Master Sunless… do you perhaps have a piece of evidence to substantiate your theory?"

Sunny simply shook his head.

"No. But… that is exactly the point. It is the absence of evidence that proves my theory. No matter how elusive, devious, and powerful a Nightmare Creature is, we should have found some kind of clue by now. Although security equipment of the facility barely works because of the interference, the cameras would have captured something.

The strict protocols and mutual responsibility system Verne had implemented would have produced some result. My shadows would have found some traces. But nothing of the sort happened… which is nothing short of impossible. There is a big negative space in the place where all the results should have been. However, we can infer certain things from that negative space itself. "

A dark expression appeared on his face.

"What I am trying to say is that there are, in fact, traces. We were just rendered incapable of comprehending them. Something like that… something like that had already happened to me once. Back then, I spent an entire month being mesmerized by an insidious Nightmare Creature.

However, I was utterly oblivious to its influence, simply for the fact the first thing that the hex did was take away my ability to become aware of its existence. I am convinced that something like that is happening to all of us right now, too."

Sunny looked at Verne and Professor Obel somberly.

"There is a powerful Gate below the surface of the water, somewhere in the vicinity of this facility. The Gate brought a dreadful Nightmare

Creature into the waking world, and that creature is using mind manipulation to both lure people into its maw and make others incapable of stopping it."

An uncomfortable silence settled in the security center. Professor Obel seemed resigned, but Verne, on the contrary, was suddenly energized.

"If that is true… then we just have to kill that abomination. Then, everything will be resolved."

There was hope and resolve in his eyes. For a warrior, having a clear enemy to fight was familiar territory.

With a sigh, Sunny shook his head.

"No. We won't be able to kill that Nightmare Creature."

Verne scowled.

"What? Why?"

Sunny pointed at the bleak steel of the Undying Chain, which he had been wearing ever since people started disappearing.

"Because this is a Transcendent armor of the third tier. One of its enchantments provides the wearer with a high degree of protection against mind attacks. And yet, I wasn't spared from the effects of the mind hex at all. You know what that means…"

Verne's face suddenly grew dim.

"...That the Nightmare Creature's attack is more powerful than your armor's defenses."

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed. Which would make it of the Corrupted Rank, at least. My bet would be that it is a Corrupted Terror. Neither of us is its match, especially not in the water. We can't kill it."

At that moment, Professor Obel finally spoke:

"So then… what should we do?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, looking at the memory storage device that lay on the table in front of him. Finally, he shifted slightly and said:

"First… we break the mind hex."

Chapter-894: Cold Waves

Sunny's plan was rather simple. Since the mental protection granted by the Undying Chain was not enough to break through the mind hex of the unknown horror, he just had to get better defenses.

Of course, he could have summoned Saint, who was completely immune to that kind of attack. If he had no choice but to fight the abomination, which Sunny suspected to be a Corrupted Terror, he would do exactly that… but at this point, he was simply trying to understand what exactly was happening, and how.

Considering that Saint would not be able to communicate what she saw, he had to try breaking through the hex himself, first.

Several minutes later, Verne summoned the officers of his Awakened force, and then sent them away with a simple task — to get every Memory that could offer at least some form of protection against mind attacks to Sunny. Considering that there were still around ninety Awakened soldiers at the facility, at least a couple of them had to have something like that in their arsenal.

Soon, Sunny found himself in possession of several loaned Memories. He was wearing the Undying Chain, which was his best tool to solve this situation. There was a new charm hanging around his neck, a strangely mercurial cloak on his back, and a flint dagger with a handle made out of weathered bone in his hand.

The dagger came from Verne himself, so it was especially powerful.

There were many people in the security center now, including Verne, Professor Obel and Beth, all six of his soldiers, and several sleep-deprived Awakened officers. Sunny was sitting in front of a screen, holding the memory storage device.

Taking a deep breath, he wrapped all four of his shadows around the

Undying Chain and felt its bleak steel become stronger, more durable, and more powerful.

Then, he inserted the memory device into the socket of the terminal and accessed the recordings stored on it.

Everyone watched the video feed of the undulating ocean with a morbid sense of curiosity. However, none of the people present in the security center noticed anything special about the recording.

After a while, Beth said in a tentative tone:

"I… don't see anything?"

However, when she looked at Sunny, there was a grim expression on his pale, tired face.

Because, unlike everyone else, Sunny was seeing things that he had been unable to notice earlier. To him, the recording showed an immensely macabre reality.

The things he saw on the screen left him disturbed, shaken, and dismayed.

'Damnation…'

As the recording went on, replaying the shifting landscape of the lightless beach from the past two days at enhanced speed, Sunny slowed it down to a crawl several times, seemingly for no apparent reason. Every time, his expression turned more and more ugly.

…He had known, of course, to expect something like that. However, watching himself nonchalantly make way for the mesmerized victims, only to forget about their existence a moment later, was deeply unsettling.

Sunny had witnessed dozens of people being swallowed by the cold waves, and yet, this was the first time his consciousness managed to become aware of that fact.

As it did, the hex was broken, and suddenly, all the memories that had been suppressed before flooded his mind.

Sunny shuddered.

'Gods…'

Noticing his strong reaction, Verne leaned forward.

"What is it? What do you see? What kind of Nightmare Creature is it? How does it capture people from within the facility?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then stopped the playback with a trembling hand. He stared at it in confusion and made a fist, causing the tremors to stop.

Finally, he let out a heavy sigh.

"...I was right, mostly. There is indeed a mind hex affecting everyone in this fortress. It makes us indifferent and unaware of the victims, and the traces left behind by them. However… I did not see the creature itself. It never appeared. The victims… they just walked into the ocean themselves, and vanished.

Some right in front of our eyes. It seems that the bastard is somehow controlling them to come to it, and us to be blind to their passing."

Verne gritted his teeth.

"...There has to be a way to stop it."

Sunny hesitated for a long time.

"In my experience, the only way to deal with a creature like that is to run away from it. While we can."

The other Master shook his head with a resentful expression. That resentment was not aimed at Sunny, however… instead, it was aimed at the dreadful being that hid beneath the waves, the Chain of Nightmares, and the sorry state of the waking world in general.

"Leaving LO49 now would be no different from suicide. We won't make it across hundreds of kilometers of rough terrain alive, not with hordes of Nightmare Creatures prowling this region of the Antarctic Center seemingly unopposed, with no intelligence about the state of

the territory and cut off from Army Command."

His eyes grew cold.

"...We have to remain here and wait for the Ariadne to arrive. It should be here in two days… or if not, soon enough. We can survive this abomination for two days."

Sunny looked at him for a while, thinking. Although remaining this close to a potential Corrupted Terror made him extremely uneasy, he had to admit that what Verne had said was reasonable.

The Ariadne, indeed, was their best chance.

He sighed.

"So, what do you propose we do in the meantime? Just let the bastard continue gobbling up humans?"

Verne crossed his arms and frowned.

"No. Now that we know what is happening, we can prevent more people from vanishing."

Sunny raised his eyebrow.

"And how do you propose we do that?"

The other Master looked at him, deep in thought. After a few moments, he said calmly:

"Well. Someone just has to prevent the victims from jumping into the ocean. Right?"

A pale smile appeared on Sunny's face.

Somehow, he already knew who was going to get that job…

Chapter-895: Catcher in the Night

Sunny was the only one who could prevent more people from silently walking into the cold ocean. Even if he returned the borrowed Memories and gave the Undying Chain to someone else, the other person would not be able to enjoy the augmentation of the four shadows. So, the mind hex would remain unbroken.

If there was one good thing about the situation, it was that after Sunny had rid himself of the hex, he did not need to keep up his mental defenses at such a high level anymore. It was as though he was now inoculated against the unknown creature's influence.

At least for now.

He returned the charm, the mercurial cloak, and the flint dagger to their owners. One shadow continued to follow Professor Obel, while the other three remained wrapped around the Undying Chain, just in case. After that, everyone got to work.

Although Sunny was the only person who could perceive the mesmerized, it did not mean that nobody else could help prevent more people from vanishing. Now that Verne knew what they were dealing with exactly, he could tune the safety protocols of the fortress to make it harder for the enemy to snatch victims away.

Soldiers received new instructions, while all non-essential personnel were confined to their living quarters. If they couldn't leave, they would most likely be unable to reach the water, after all.

Sunny, meanwhile…

Walking onto the dark beach, he sighed, then placed an intricate wooden chair at the very edge of the rustling waves and sat down

with his back to the ocean. Facing the wall of the fortress. Sunny shivered in the cold wind for a few moments, leaned back, and leisurely crossed his legs.

'It's a bit chilly…'

The world was dark, and the only sounds surrounding him were the howling of the wind and the incessant murmur of the waves. Sitting with his back to the ocean was not pleasant, especially with a Corrupted Terror hiding somewhere beneath its lightless surface.

The only thing that made Sunny feel better was the unmoving silhouette of Saint, who was hidden in the shadow of the wall with Morgan's Warbow in her hands. Even then, Sunny had a lot to worry about.

Would he really be able to stop people from reaching the water?

Would they resist, or would they allow themselves to be brought back inside LO49?

…Most importantly, what would the Terror do if its source of sustenance was suddenly cut off? Somehow, Sunny doubted that the creature was going to just leave them be.

He just had to hope that the rescue ship would arrive before the eventual retaliation, and take them away before the creature could cast its hex on the crew, as well.

With a sigh, Sunny released his shadows and sent them forward. The shadows climbed the wall and separated, assuming watching positions in three different spots.

Then, all he could do was wait and listen to the rustle of the waves behind him.

A minute passed, then another. Then, a few more.

Sunny opened a thermos he had brought with him and poured himself a cup of fragrant coffee. Sipping it in the bitter cold, he continued to wait and pretend that the ocean did not concern him at all.

After about an hour, a human figure finally appeared on the wall. Sunny slapped himself in the face to chase away sleepiness, then put the thermos down and stood up. One step through the shadows brought him to the mesmerized person.

The man… he knew that man. It was one of the Awakened officers in charge of the local garrison. This soldier had usually been cheerful and energetic, even after staying awake for close to two weeks. But now, there was a blank, empty expression on his face, and no light in his hollow eyes.

Sunny stood between the slowly walking Awakened and the lip of the wall.

This time, he did not step aside to make way.

Instead, he hesitated for a moment, then put his hand on the soldier's shoulder, stopping him. The man made a few more awkward steps, not realizing that he was walking in place. Then, he ceased moving and slowly turned his head, staring at Sunny with calm, glassy eyes.

'Damn. That's creepy!'

Sunny opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment, a strong blow sent him flying back. Crashing into the rampart, he broke through it and tumbled off the wall, landing on the rocks far below in an undignified heap.

'Argh. What the hell?'

The strike was much, much stronger than anything a mere Awakened should have been able to deliver. Even without augmenting his body with the shadows, Sunny was a Master. He also had four cores and a sea of essence at his disposal.

Why was the mesmerized officer so strong?

Cursing, he slowly rose from the ground. At the same time, the Awakened landed on the rocks a few steps away from him, swayed a little, and continued marching toward the dark waves. Since Sunny was not blocking his path anymore, the soldier did not pay him any more attention.

'Not so fast, you damned fool…'

Creating a long chain out of the shadows, Sunny made a loop out of it and tossed it forward, ensnaring the mesmerized man. Taking the unexpected strength that the soldier had shown into account, he added another chain for good measure and grinned weakly.

'Huh… just like the good old times.'

The memory of throwing a chain loop at the Mountain King was still vivid and fresh in his mind.

Making sure that Verne's officer was immobilized, Sunny dragged him back, and then scaled the wall.

A few minutes later, slightly out of breath, he reached the old observatory and walked inside. There, the first few containment units had already been built, and a working crew was hurriedly creating more. They glanced at Sunny with confusion, but then quickly lost interest, distracted by the mind hex.

Ignoring the workers, Sunny walked to the nearest unit, threw the mesmerized officer inside, and locked the door. Even for an Awakened, escaping from a prison like that was not supposed to be possible.

A moment later, several furious strikes landed on the walls of the containment cell from inside, making it shudder. However, in the end, the sturdy construction held. Realizing that he would not be able to break free, the mesmerized soldier walked to the corner that was the closest to the ocean, pressed against it, and froze.

He just stood there, unmoving like a statue, not doing anything.

Sunny slowly exhaled.

'Well, that's not bad.'

He had been afraid that the mesmerized would bang their heads against the walls of their cages, attempting to reach the ocean even if it was not possible.

"Oh… Master Sunless? When did you get here?"

Now that he was not holding the soldier, the workers finally noticed his presence. They stared at Sunny with surprised eyes.

He blinked a couple of times, then smiled.

"...Carry on. I am just passing by."

At that moment, his shadows noticed another human climbing onto the wall.

Sunny sighed, lingered for a moment, and then stepped through the shadows once again.

Chapter-896: The Obstacle

Sunny felt like he was going insane.

He was tired, sleep-deprived, and cold. He was stuck in a fortress on a remote continent, which had been built around an eerie abandoned observatory. The fortress was being besieged by an unknown horror from the depths, and he was the only person who had managed to escape from the horror's hex.

The strangest thing about all that, however, was that Sunny was sometimes invisible. Every time he subdued and dragged one of the victims to the containment facility built inside the old observatory, everyone in the settlement acted as though he did not exist.

No, not exactly invisible… people were able to observe him. But the fact of his existence seemed to flow out of their consciousness almost immediately after being registered there. As long as Sunny was in the presence of one of the mesmerized victims, the residents of LO49 looked at him, frowned, and then went about their business, instantly forgetting what they had seen. It was really unnerving.

In his exhausted state, Sunny felt a deep and irrational fear that if this went on, he would be forgotten by everyone, forever.

He wondered if that was how the Demon of Oblivion had felt.

…Luckily, the bizarre effect seemed to only last for as long as Sunny was transporting prisoners to their cells. As soon as he placed them in the containment units, his existence was made normal once again. Well… as far as his existence could be called normal, to begin with.

On the first day of his catcher duty, Sunny had fought, subdued, and imprisoned twenty-nine people. His muscles were sore, and his armor was wet from being close to the water for so long. Despite his efforts — and to his relief — the Terror had not reacted to the sudden

obstacle that appeared in the path of its satiation. At least not yet.

Saint continued to hide in the shadow of the tall wall of the fortress, monitoring the deep, dark, cold waters of the ocean.

At midnight, Sunny reported the results of his effort to Verne. They walked over to the observatory together, where the other Master remained silent for a long time.

"Are you telling me that there are people in these cells?"

Sunny struggled with a yawn, failed to suppress it, and then nodded.

"...Yeah. Around thirty of them."

Verne stared at the cells with a deep frown for a minute or two, then shook his head in bewilderment.

"Strange. Even though I know that they're there, I can't see anything. To me, the cells seem empty."

Sunny was a bit late to react.

"Oh. Believe me, they're there. They just stand near the southern side of their units and do nothing. At least they are staring at the walls, and not at us. That would be really creepy."

Verne looked at him with dark amusement.

"...I think this situation is sufficiently creepy as it is."

Then, he turned away from the cells and asked in a somber tone:

"Any change in the Terror's behavior?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. At least not that I've noticed."

Verne remained silent for a moment, and sighed.

"Good. Continue, then. The Ariadne should be arriving soon, so… we just have to endure a little bit longer."

Just like that, Sunny continued his eerie task. He waited by the water, caught the people trying to drown themselves in the ocean, and locked them up in cells while suffering from being invisible.

'Damn cold…'

He had long summoned the Memory of Ice and continuously fed it with essence to save himself from the chilling wind.

Just like that, another day passed. During that day, Sunny rescued thirty-five people from being devoured by the waves. His skill of making chains out of shadows improved by a lot.

A few minutes before midnight, Sunny was sitting on his chair with an empty thermos in his hand, and stared at the sky. Today, there was no moon, and no aurora. Only the stars remained, shining softly up above.

'The waves sound differently today…'

He rubbed his face, then turned around and stared at the undulating black surface of the ocean with intense distrust.

Just then, something seemed to change about the world. Sunny frowned, but before he could do anything, another figure appeared on the wall, forcing a long sigh to escape from his lips.

'Forty… it is accelerating.'

He stood up, ready to step through the shadows and subdue the fortieth victim, but there was something strange about the figure. Instead of moving toward the edge of the wall like the rest of them, it stopped and raised a hand, as if signaling to him.

'Huh?'

It was Quentin.

Sunny conserved his essence by jogging forward, then lowering his body slightly and mounting the wall with one inhumanly high jump. He landed on the concrete surface of the rampart, walked a few steps, and looked at Quentin with a deep frown.

"What? What happened?"

The chivalrous healer smiled, excitement shining in his eyes.

"Captain! The observatory… you need to see…"

Without wasting any time, Sunny jumped down to the roof of the nearby building, and then hurried toward the white dome at the center of the settlement. Walking inside, he instantly heard a swarm of confused, frightened, and angry voices.

"What? Where am I?"

"What happened?"

"Hey! Someone! What the hell is this?! Let me out!"

He stared, dumbfounded.

These voices… were coming from within the cells. They belonged to the victims he had imprisoned. Somehow, they seemed to have shrugged off the mind hex and regained their awareness.

And it wasn't just them.

Sunny turned his head and looked at the maintenance workers that were in charge of keeping the containment units secure. They were all speaking with excitement and glancing at the cells with relieved faces. They heard the victims, too.

…Which meant that the hex was not affecting them anymore, either.

"Thank the gods! That abomination must have left!"

Despite the happy circumstances, Sunny was suddenly overwhelmed by a deep, cold, urgent feeling of unease. It grasped his heart and remained there, growing slightly stronger with each second.

He shivered.

'...What is going on?'

Chapter-897: Silent Ocean

After Sunny had broken through the mind hex and spent two days rescuing the mesmerized people, saving dozens of lives, the horror hiding in the cold black waves seemed to have left the vicinity of LO49.

The victims had regained their senses, and every person in the settlement was able to see and hear them clearly once again. In the next few hours, no one showed any sign of being under the influence of the hex. The vanishings stopped.

And the Ariadne was supposed to arrive soon.

The exhausted, frightened, and shaken inhabitants of the fortress were tentatively starting to unwind. Their fragile hope bloomed and blossomed.

However, the person most responsible for the positive change — Sunny — did not feel any of their cheer or relief. On the contrary, with each passing minute, his unease and sense of foreboding only grew stronger.

He did not like what was happening, not at all.

Walking through the snowy streets of the settlement, Sunny studied the lively faces of patrolling soldiers with a troubled expression on his own. It was dark and somber.

'...Doesn't make sense. None of it makes any sense.'

Approaching the security center, he placed his hand on the panel of a sophisticated biometric lock. The sensor was supposed to initiate a thorough scan, but as seconds passed, nothing seemed to happen. The damn thing was on the fritz.

Sunny stared at it for a moment, then sighed and banged on the heavy alloy door with his fist. Soon, it was manually unlocked from the inside by a sleepy soldier, who then allowed Sunny in.

Walking inside the security center, Sunny dusted snow off his shoulders, looked around, and headed toward Verne.

"What is the situation?"

Verne sent one of his officers off with a list of orders, then looked at his younger colleague and shrugged.

"Nothing changed. The Terror — or whatever that abomination was — seems to have truly moved on."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"When has a Nightmare Creature ever moved on? You're deluding yourself."

The older Master frowned.

"We can't know for sure, of course, but the disappearance of the hex speaks for itself. Don't sell yourself short. Although creatures capable of mind manipulation are exceedingly dangerous, they often lack direct means of launching an effective attack. Maybe it decided to search for easier prey after you proved capable of dismantling its mental attack."

Sunny stared at him for a bit, then shook his head.

"A Corrupted Terror is a Corrupted Terror. We probably haven't seen even a fraction of its power yet, so why would it simply give up and leave?"

Verne tiredly rubbed his face and sighed.

"Do take into account that the creature's Rank and Class are only your conjecture. We don't really know how powerful it actually was. In any case, how else do you explain the fact that the hex is gone, and no one is vanishing anymore?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"Maybe it decided to change tactics. Maybe it is gathering power for a singular, overwhelming attack. Maybe it just enjoys toying with its prey. Who the hell knows?!"

His counterpart looked away with a somber expression.

"...Alright, but what do you want me to do? It's not like I've relaxed the security measures. We are still on high alert and prepared for battle. We are still keeping the civilians locked up and concentrating our defenses on the southern wall. I don't see what other contingencies are there to prepare."

Sunny let out a frustrated sigh.

"All I am saying is that it's not a good time to become complacent. On the contrary, we must be preparing for a rapid escalation of the crisis."

Verne stared at him blankly for a few seconds.

"And all I am saying is that we are already doing everything we can. No matter how small, the possibility that you are right still exists, so we must. That is my position as the officer responsible for the safety of every person inside this facility. But personally… I think that exhaustion and paranoia are getting the better of you, Sunless. It's been hard on all of us."

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then said in a subdued voice:

"My paranoia has never led me astray, though."

With that, he winced and left.

'Maybe I am really wrong this time. Even if I'm not, Verne is right… what else are we supposed to do? Until the damned ship arrives, there's not much more we can prepare.'

But why did he feel so disturbed? Why was his sense of unease so urgent?

Walking out of the security center, Sunny stood in place for a while with a dark expression on his face. After some time, he noticed Luster loitering around, and called him over.

"Uh… yes? You wanted something, Captain?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then nodded.

"Yeah. Gather the others and tell them to stick close to the Rhino. Also, make sure that it's ready to move, in case we need to get the hell out of this damned place in a hurry."

Luster blinked a couple of times, looking at him with a startled expression. Then, he gulped.

"Ah… understood, sir. I'll go do that, then."

Letting the young man go, Sunny turned south and stared at the distant wall for a bit. Frowning, he then headed toward it.

The beach was cold and shrouded in darkness, like always. The black waves continued their eternal, fruitless assault on the shore. They came and went with a wide, reverberating rustle, making it seem as though the whole ocean was breathing.

His chair was still standing at the edge of the water, with an empty thermos laying on the stones nearby.

Descending from the wall, Sunny slowly walked toward the water and stopped just outside its reach, staring at the vast undulating expanse of the cold ocean with a deep scowl. His tired eyes were hidden in shadows.

Looking at the waves, he whispered:

"Where are you, bastard? What are you planning?"

…Of course, the ocean remained silent. There was no response.

Chapter-898: Going for a Swim

Sunny stood at the edge of the water for a while, looking at the ocean with a wary expression on his face.

'Funny…'

Back when he had first developed the habit of climbing the southern wall of the fortress, he stared at the ocean in hopes of witnessing the fearsome silhouette of the mighty battleship appearing from the darkness. But now that the Ariadne was about to arrive, his thoughts were far away.

Eventually, Sunny sighed and finally dismissed his chair, planning to return into the warmth of the settlement.

…However, just before he turned away from the dark water, something attracted his attention. A subtle gleam a few steps further down the shore, revealed from beneath the retreating waves. As though bleak starlight was reflecting from a small piece of glass.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then walked a meter or two forward, stopping at the spot where he had spotted the gleaming object. A new wave rushed in, licking his armored boots. He had to wait for it to crawl back before kneeling and taking a closer look at the wet rocks.

There, between them, something glistened, buried under several shards of ice. Sunny brushed the ice away and picked the object up, then stood up before the next wave came.

His frown deepened.

In his hand was a simple brass button, similar to those that could be found on the countless winter coats issued to soldiers of the First Evacuation Army as part of their kit.

By itself, the button was nothing special.

However…

'Huh?'

However, Verne and the soldiers under his command were not part of the First Evacuation Army. They were locals of Antarctica, and had served at LO49 long before the Chain of Nightmares. As such, their uniforms were slightly different. In fact, they were of a far better quality, considering that the First Army had been assembled and outfitted in a tremendous hurry.

Their kits were far better suited for cold weather, and included well-designed parkas that could keep a person warm in most dire of circumstances instead of cheap mass-produced coats.

So how did this button end up here?

Sunny stared at the round piece of brass for a few minutes, and then slowly looked up, facing the darkness of the ocean. There was a strangely resigned expression on his pale face.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes and extended his shadow sense forward, as far as it could go.

'Alright. Fine. Come on… show yourself, bastard. I know you didn't leave.'

His senses spread forward, diving deep under the black surface of the cold water. Everywhere light reached, there were shadows, after all. And even where light never entered, there was its absence.

However, Sunny did not sense the Terror no matter how hard he tried. He did find something, though.

Twenty or thirty meters away from him, deep underwater, there was a large shape. It rested on the seabed, moving slightly from time to time as the currents pulled it back and forth. The shape was irregular and mostly flat, with a very slight curve. Its edges were sharp and jagged.

That was all Sunny could say from sensing its shadow… that and the fact that the shape was not that of a living thing, considering that the shadow lacked the quality of being cast by something possessing a soul.

He had no idea what it was.

The ocean contained all kinds of junk, so why would he care?

But for some reason, he did.

Opening his eyes, Sunny looked at the undulating waves for a bit. Then, he slowly took a step forward, and then another. And then, another.

The cold, freezing water reached his shins first, then his knees. Then, his waist. He shivered, gasped for breath, but continued walking forward.

'I… I am not mesmerized, am I?'

No, he couldn't be… he had broken the hex… his mind was his own…

When the water reached his chest, Sunny took a deep breath and dove down into the black depths. Swimming in a suit of steel armor was not an easy task, even one as thin and light as the Undying Chain. However, he possessed strength and endurance that far surpassed a mundane human, so Sunny persisted, plunging deeper and deeper into the ocean.

Despite the Memory of Ice hanging from a string on his neck, a cold like he had never experienced enveloped his body, making it hard for him to breathe, think, and move his limbs. Gritting his teeth, Sunny ignored it and swam toward the distant shape.

After what felt like an eternity, he finally reached the seabed and pushed himself along its uneven surface, getting closer and closer to his target. Far away on the shore, Saint emerged from the shadow of the wall and approached the edge of the waves, raising her bow. If anything happened, she would be able to send an arrow flying instantly.

That made Sunny feel a little better, even though he did not know how powerful the arrow would remain after piercing tens of meters of water. Considering the strength of Morgan's Warbow, it should still be deadly, but…

The efficacy of the arrow, of course, would depend on the power of the potential enemy.

'Don't think about that yet…'

Concentrating on his task, Sunny moved forward, reached the strange shape and opened his eyes. He observed it through the mass of murky water.

The shape… was a piece of torn alloy. It was around ten meters in length and slightly less in width. The tough material was viciously bent and broken, with jagged edges and deep cracks crawling through its surface. It seemed to have been torn away from a larger whole by something large and incredibly powerful.

However, there was no rust on the damaged metal, suggesting that it had not spent a lot of time in the water.

Sunny got closer, feeling as if he recognized the composition and characteristics of the alloy. His mind raced, trying to confirm that familiarity…

He placed one hand on the cold metal, remembering.

Then, his eyes narrowed, and a few bubbles of air escaped from his mouth.

…Of course, he knew where this strong and thick alloy was used. The same type of metal comprised the inner layers of a naval vessel's reinforced armor.

The deformed mass of twisted alloy...

It was a broken piece of a battleship's hull.

Chapter-899: Only Hope

Gasping for breath, Sunny rolled out of the shadows and fell on the wet rocks at the edge of the rolling waves. Streams of water flowed from his armor, and his whole body was trembling.

"C—cold… ah, s—so cold…"

Gritting his teeth, he stood up and shivered as the wind assaulted him. At that moment, not even his Ascended constitution and the Memory of Ice could protect him from being chilled to the bone.

But even then, the claws grasping his heart were much colder.

"Curse it..."

Sunny took a step forward, stumbled, then righted himself and stopped. His fists were clenched.

'Ariadne. It must have been the Ariadne.'

The broken piece of the hull, the brass button, it all made too much terrible sense. Of course, this evidence alone was not enough to make a definite conclusion, but Sunny was sure of it. His intuition told him that much.

No one was coming to rescue the people trapped inside LO49.

...And the Terror was going to descend upon them soon, without a doubt.

Suddenly forlorn, Sunny glanced at the wall of the fortress with a lost look on his face. A few moments passed, accompanied by the howling of the wind. Then, he looked down, closed his eyes, and groaned.

"Ah… I'm so tired."

It was the cold that made him shrug off this moment of indecisiveness and start to move. No matter the situation, he had to get somewhere warm first.

One step, and he was on top of the wall. A second step, and he was standing on one of the streets of the settlement. A third step, and he suddenly appeared in the corner of a research laboratory where a group of scientists, including Professor Obel and Beth, were staying under guard.

The young woman was the first to notice him. She was slightly startled by the sight.

"...Ascended Sunless? What are you doing here?"

Sunny looked at her and forced out a pale smile.

"Don't mind me. I just got cold outside."

He stared at Beth with a strangely heavy expression for a few moments, and then shook his head.

"In any case, I'll be going now."

Sunny had to see Verne first. He dried himself off, then went back to the security center, feeling the urgent sense of alarm growing louder and louder in his head.

Before, Sunny had not known its source, and thought that he had days to discover it. But now, he wasn't so sure…

Maybe there were only hours left before the disaster his intuition was warning him about would happen.

…Maybe even minutes.

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"...You're not listening."

Sunny glared at Verne as the seconds ticked away. Tick-tock. With each second, their fates were coming closer to being sealed. And yet,

the tall Master was being difficult.

"I am listening."

Sunny suppressed the desire to hit the table with his fist. Not only would the table shatter and create a lot of noise, but it would also not help his argument in any way. More than that, he was too tired, and had no energy to go around breaking furniture.

"Then why the hell are you not doing anything?!"

Verne sighed.

"What am I supposed to do?"

Sunny blinked.

"Gather everyone, load them into the transports, and drive away from this cursed place! What else?!"

Verne looked at him for a while, his frown growing deeper.

"With all due respect, Sunless, you are not making a lot of sense. You are trying to convince me that the Ariadne is not coming, but your only piece of evidence is a button and a piece of metal that you found underwater. We both know how much junk and old wreckage was left in the oceans after the Dark Times. That armor fragment could have come from anywhere, rust or no rust."

Sunny wanted to answer in anger, but managed to hold himself back. Verne was not wrong to doubt his rather unsubstantiated theory. Any good leader would question the validity of such information. The problem was that Verne did not have the benefit of being intimately connected to the Strings of Fate, like Sunny was. He did not have Sunny's intuition.

He was blind to fate.

"Listen… this is what my gut is telling me. Staying here would be a terrible mistake."

Nevertheless, Verne remained unmoved. He lingered for a few

moments, and then shook his head. His next words sounded polite, but had a sense of weight to them.

"I can't gamble with the lives of fourteen hundred people because of your gut, Sunless."

'This damned fool!'

Sunny let out a frustrated sigh.

Verne… was an experienced government officer. From their brief but intense partnership, it had become clear that he was reserved, methodical, and did things by the book. He had received orders from Army Command to reinforce LO49 and wait for the naval rescue, and that was what he was determined to do. Breaking an order was not an easy thing for him. His mind was not flexible enough.

"You have to admit that I at least might be right. So, staying is also a gamble. We are outside the parameters of standard procedure, Verne! Can't you think for yourself, for once?"

Although that last statement was a bit rude, Verne did not react much. He just stared at Sunny with his usual serious expression, then turned away and sighed. A few moments later, he said quietly:

"It doesn't matter, anyway."

Sunny scowled. The words caught him by surprise.

'What the hell does he mean?'

"...What?"

The older Master looked down.

"Sunless… we are cut off from Army Command. The situation in the north is bad. We don't know how bad, but it has to be dire for so many Nightmare Creatures to travel freely through the mountains. The last thing we heard was that several Titans had emerged. We don't even know if any of the siege capitals still stand."

As he spoke, his tired face grew darker and darker.

"The terrain between here and the last known encampment of the First Evacuation Army is a maze, with countless swarms of abominations prowling in the dark. Our tech is barely working, if at all. Our soldiers are all exhausted or on the verge of collapse. What I am trying to say is that a convoy transporting hundreds of civilian non-combatants won't survive the journey.

Not with what we have left to protect it."

Verne gritted his teeth.

"So, it's not that I refuse to entertain the idea that the Ariadne won't arrive. It's that I can't... because that ship is our only hope."

His words echoed in the empty room of the security center, making Sunny feel even colder.

Chapter-900: Don't Look Back

A somber silence settled in the conference room of the security center. Eventually, Verne was the first to break it. Straightening, he looked at Sunny and said in a heavy tone:

"The… the best I can do is ask for volunteers among my Awakened. To risk falling asleep. Some of them might die, but a few should return with the news from the Dream Realm. Then, we can discuss evacuation by land."

Sunny stared at him without saying anything. His anger was suddenly gone, and instead, all that was left was fatigue, regret, and a vague feeling of dark resentment.

'Damn it all…'

If Verne indeed sent volunteers into the Dream Realm, even knowing that it would be a one-way trip for some of them… they would return in about eight hours. Finding out what was happening up north would help Sunny tremendously.

But eight hours was too long.

His growing panic was already almost suffocating. He did not know if they had eight minutes left, let alone eight hours.

"There's no time. You can't."

Verne leaned on the table and closed his eyes for a moment. It was hard to know what was going through his mind, but Sunny somehow knew that he would not be able to convince the stern officer.

His heart felt cold.

'Ah, that feeling… this bitter feeling. I have not tasted it in a while, I

think.'

At that moment, Verne suddenly said:

"...A large convoy won't make it. But a single, robust vehicle probably can."

Sunny frowned, struggling to follow the line of thought, perhaps due to his exhaustion.

"What exactly do you mean?"

The older Master looked at him and shrugged with strange calmness.

"I mean that we don't have to put all our eggs in one basket. Your mission is not to protect every person in this facility, Sunless. Unlike mine. Your mission is to rescue one specific, high-value target. Both of us have to carry out our duty to the best of our ability, though. So… take Professor Obel, load up your APC, and leave immediately.

This way, even if your theory is right, it won't be… a total loss for humanity."

There was a lot that had been said, and a lot that had remained unsaid. But there was no need to speak some words aloud. The two Masters looked at each other for a few moments, a silent understanding between them. In the end, the corner of Sunny's mouth twitched.

"I still think that you are wrong. People don't know what is possible and what is impossible until they try it. Well… that was often the case, at least, in my life."

Verne simply nodded.

"Then prove me wrong, Sunless. I wish you luck."

Sunny grimaced, lingered for a second or two, and then turned around. A moment later, he was gone from the room.

He had nothing more to say, and no time to waste.

There was no time at all.

Feeling a frightening sense of urgency, Sunny used Shadow Step to appear directly inside the research center. This time, Beth was even more surprised to see him.

"Are you… wait, no way… Master Sunless, do you perchance keep frightening me just for fun?"

He shook his head, looked around, and then beckoned for the young woman to come closer. What he had to say needed to be kept from other ears.

Frowning, Beth left Professor Obel's side and walked over to where he was standing. Grabbing her by the shoulder, Sunny unceremoniously dragged the young woman to an adjacent room.

"Wha… what the hell do you think you're…"

He closed the door and turned around, his sunken, manic eyes making Beth shudder.

"Be quiet and listen. There has been a change of plans."

With no time to explain everything in detail, Sunny just told her the necessary parts — that the Professor was in danger, and that he had to be evacuated immediately.

That sudden revelation was hard to digest, and there would be a potentially fatal delay if Beth refused to listen immediately, so Sunny constructed his words in a way that played on her deeply ingrained values — loyalty to the old man and the desire to keep him alive.

Beth's eyes widened.

"But… but why come to me? Why didn't you just approach the Professor?"

Sunny simply shook his head.

"Professor Obel is a noble man. He would be reluctant to leave his people to save himself… so, I need you to persuade him. Fast. You

know him best, after all."

The young woman still did not understand.

"But… but can't we just take everyone?"

Her voice was small.

Sunny looked at her somberly, knowing that was something that he couldn't do.

"My vehicle can only carry so many people. Now, go and do what I said. Every minute we waste can mean the difference between life and death."

Beth nodded in a daze, then slowly turned around, rearranged her lab coat, and left the room.

Sunny looked through the crack of the opened door at the scientists surrounding the professor, and then turned around in shame. However, this self-indulgence only lasted a second.

He had no time for regret, either.

Not caring about the expenditure of essence, Sunny traveled through the shadows and soon appeared near the Rhino. He could feel three shadows inside, while Luster, Kim, and Quentin were standing in front of the APC.

Noticing him, they straightened their postures.

"Captain, sir! Uh… I did as you told."

Sunny glanced at Luster and nodded.

"Go and run the startup sequence. I want the Rhino to be ready to depart at any second."

The young man's eyes turned into circles, but he swiftly dove into the hatch without asking any questions. Sunny, Kim, and Quentin were left alone in the biting cold.

Feeling his heart beating wildly, Sunny looked up at the sky.

The sky was covered by white haze.

'...The blizzard is starting again.'

At that moment, Quentin cautiously asked:

"Captain… I am sorry, but what exactly is happening?"

He gave the gallant healer a short glance.

"We're leaving."

Both his subordinates seemed startled.

"Leaving? Right now? But… why?"

Sunny lingered with the answer.

"Because we have orders to keep the VIP alive."

That seemed to make them stop asking questions.

A minute passed, then another. His bloodstream was full of adrenaline, as though he was in the middle of a battle. Time crawled at a snail's pace, and for some reason, Sunny felt as though he was locked inside a pillory, waiting for the guillotine's blade to come down.

'Walk faster, damn it!'

His instincts were screaming that they had to leave LO49, now.

Finally, two figures appeared from the milky-white haze. Professor Obel was walking stiffly, with a troubled face. Beth was both supporting him and carrying a small bag.

The old man stopped near Sunny and looked at him with a solemn expression. He hesitated to speak.

"Young man… I hear that you will be taking us away now."

Sunny nodded.

"Yes, Professor. Get inside, please. Hurry. I'll explain later."

They entered the Rhino and closed the hatch. While Beth was looking around with subdued curiosity, Luster sent the heavy vehicle moving.

The sentries had already been informed by Verne, so they opened the gate and allowed the Irregulars to drive through them.

…Until the last second, Sunny was certain that something would go horribly wrong. But, somehow, it didn't.

The Rhino drove away from the fortress, passed by the fleet of transports parked outside, and disappeared into the white wall of the blizzard. Only when the lights of the facility vanished from view did Sunny feel an almost overwhelming sense of relief.

He leaned… no, almost crashed… on the bulkhead behind him and let out a trembling breath.

'We made it. We made it in time…'

Although there were many confused and concerned gazes aimed at him, Sunny remained silent. Slowly, the distance between the Rhino and the Lunar Observatory Forty-Nine grew larger and larger. A kilometer, then another… then a dozen.

They were leaving it behind.

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Some time later, when the heavy vehicle traversed approximately half the length of the coastal plain separating the ocean shore from the mountains, Sunny commanded Luster to stop and hide the Rhino in the wreckage of a massive war machine left behind from the Dark Times.

He closed his eyes and concentrated for a few minutes. His shadows made sure that there were no Nightmare Creatures laying around in wait.

After that, Sunny inhaled deeply.

"The Call is not too strong here. It should be condition green, so… congratulations, guys. You can finally rest."

Despite their unease and doubts, his soldiers reacted to that statement with visible excitement. They, too, were on the verge of collapse from fatigue and exhaustion.

"Luster, Kim, and Dorn. You guys sleep first. The other three, keep watch and take care of our guests."

They nodded, already knowing their roles.

"Yes, sir! But… uh… Captain, what about you?"

Sunny looked at Belle with a dark expression.

"...I have something to do."

He headed for the exit hatch. Beth tried to get in his way with a question, but he simply looked at her, and the young woman suddenly backed away.

Exiting the Rhino, Sunny walked into the blizzard, and then summoned the Nightmare. His loyal steed rose from the shadows, its eyes burning with dreadful crimson flames. Jumping into the saddle, Sunny sent it galloping through the snow.

He left one shadow to stand guard near the Rhino, of course.

By now, the range at which he could control it was past thirteen kilometers. That was more or less half the current distance between the Rhino and LO49.

He flew back south, summoning the closed featureless helmet of the Undying Chain to protect himself from the cutting wind. His shadow sense spread outward, replacing sight that was useless in the furious snowstorm.

Stopping at the very edge of Shadow Control's range, Sunny remained in the saddle, and sent another shadow forward. It slid south with

tremendous speed, and eventually reached the walls of the facility.

There were formidable turrets on them, powerful spotlights flooding the immediate vicinity of the fortress with light, snowflakes dancing in the wide beams. The gates that the Rhino had left no more than an hour ago were tightly shut. A fleet of transport vehicles was parked in front of it, covered in snow, their initial purpose long forgotten.

The blizzard obscured the world, and for a moment — just like when he had first arrived — Sunny felt a pang of fear. It was as though the whole facility was empty, with only ghosts populating its streets.

…Only, this time, his fear came true.

There was no one standing watch on the walls. No soldiers patrolled the deserted streets. The buildings stood empty, with screens still showing recordings of entertainment programs, food laying on the plates, and coffee growing cold in the mugs.

But there were no people.

There were no scientists in the research laboratory, and no officers in the security center. The feed of the functioning security cameras showed no movement throughout the whole settlement.

The doors of the living quarters where the civilians had been confined were still locked, but there was no one inside. There were no signs of struggle, and no fresh footprints in the snow covering the ground outside.

Everything was just… still.

Fourteen hundred people had disappeared into thin air. They seemed to have simply vanished, like they had never existed at all.

…Many kilometers away, Sunny looked at the southern wall of the fortress through the eyes of his shadows. He felt compelled to send the shadow forward, and gaze at the dark ocean once more.

But in the end, with a shiver, he decided against it.

Soon, the shadow returned. Wrapping it around his body, Sunny

commanded Nightmare to turn around, and rode into the blizzard without looking back.

Maybe he did not want to…

And maybe he simply did not dare.

Chapter-901: Degrees of Danger

The world was white.

Well, actually, it was black. Shrouded in the darkness of the long night, Sunny rode north through the wailing hurricane of snow. To his eyes, which could see through any shadows, the snow appeared as light-grey, bordering on white.

The way back was not long enough to deal with thoughts and emotions raging in his heart, but luckily, Sunny had too many worries about the future to drown in the regrets of the past.

'...Doesn't matter, anyway.'

Verne was dead, and everyone else was also dead. None of the people Sunny had come to know in the past weeks survived. Now, all he could do was make sure that his soldiers, Professor Obel, and Beth did not share their fate.

That was not going to be an easy task.

Soon, the wreckage of the old war machine appeared in view. Sunny dismissed Nightmare, walked into the rusted metal frame and lingered for a few moments in front of the Rhino. Then, he opened the hatch and climbed inside.

Quentin, Samara, and Belle were keeping watch, each of them tense and ready for battle. Noticing him, the Irregulars sighed with relief.

"Captain. You're back."

Sunny nodded.

"Did anything happen in my absence?"

Quentin shook his head.

"There were no Nightmare Creatures yet. Professor Obel and Miss Beth were both exhausted, so they are sleeping. We settled the Professor in your quarters. I hope you don't mind."

He remained silent for a moment, then added with a hint of melancholy in his voice:

"...Of course, we are keeping an eye on them. In case one or both have become carriers of the Spell."

Sunny did not particularly care about the accommodations at that moment, so he simply nodded. The first point of Quentin's short report was the most important.

'No Nightmare Creatures, yet…'

That could change at any point.

In fact, he had taken a risk by allowing his soldiers to sleep and leaving the Rhino, even if one of his shadows had stayed back to observe the surroundings and be a potential exit point of Shadow Step.

Out here in the wild expanse of the Antarctic Center, it was Nightmare Creature country now. Hordes of them moved through the mountains, many spilling down onto the coastal plain. A transient swarm could have stumbled on the cohort's camp at any moment, so it was not secure.

But security was a thing of the past now.

Before, he had had choices that were safe, and choices that were dangerous. But after leaving the protection of LO49 and its thick walls, he could only choose between different degrees of danger. It was all about calculating the probable risk.

…Even then, with his [Fated] Attribute, such calculations were more or less useless.

Grimacing, Sunny covered his face with a hand and then rubbed it. He was too tired and numb to care right now. He needed rest, too.

"Well. I am going to take a nap, then. Wake me up if there's movement outside."

Since his comfortable bed was currently occupied by Professor Obel, Sunny climbed into one of the free sleeping nooks and closed his eyes.

How risky was it to fall asleep right now?

Before letting his consciousness plunge into the comfortable embrace of darkness, he summoned Saint and ordered her to guard the Rhino from the shadows.

That was all Sunny could do…

***

The night never ended, and morning never came. When Sunny woke up, the world was exactly the same as it had been before. The raging blizzard enveloped the world, obscuring the cold dark sky. He had been pulled out of his dreamless slumber by the sound of a sleeping pod opening nearby.

Opposite him, a panel on the wall of the Rhino slid away, revealing a sleeping niche hidden behind it. Dorn's massive figure could be seen inside. The giant man had drawn a short straw when they were assigned the transport vehicle, since standard pods were a little bit too small for his prodigious body. Watching him climbing out of one was slightly comical, every time.

Sunny did not smile, though.

Making sure that his shadows and Saint did not perceive any threat, he left his niche. Soon, Luster and Kim woke up, too.

"Quentin, Belle, Samara — your turn."

The three Irregulars could not wait to get some long-awaited rest. Their fatigue and desire to sleep were so overwhelming that they did not even linger to listen to the report that their colleagues had brought from the Dream Realm. A minute later, all three were gone into the sleeping pods.

Sunny studied Kim, Luster, and Dorn. They looked much better than they had yesterday. Even though one night of rest was not enough to remove all the accumulated fatigue, Awakened were resilient creatures.

Sunny, who had only slept a few hours, felt utterly broken instead of rested himself. However, that feeling would pass soon.

"So?"

His soldiers glanced at each other. After a few moments, Dorn was the first one to speak.

"It's not good, Captain."

…This time, Sunny did smile.

"Wow. Who could have thought."

The giant man nodded awkwardly, and then started the report.

"From what we were able to find out, East Antarctica is still under human control, but the Antarctic Center… it's all a big mess."

His face darkened.

"The Saints were eventually able to kill one of the Titans, but two more remain. A chunk of the mountain chain was destroyed in the battle, too. But that's not the worst of it…"

Sunny let out a frustrated sigh.

"Just come clean with it."

Dorn looked down.

"The siege capital that our division was supposed to establish… it is gone. Wiped out of the map completely. The survivors, whoever remains — both soldiers and civilians — are in the process of trying to retreat to other strongholds. There's no organized First Army force left from here to Mount Erebus, sir."

Sunny remained silent for a long time, a resentful expression appearing on his face.

'Just like that.'

Their four hundred kilometers journey… seemed to have just turned into a thousand kilometers journey.

Chapter-902: State of Affairs

Dorn, Kim, and Luster brought other news from the Dream Realm, too. All of it was fragmented and chaotic, since the First Army itself did not seem to have a strong hold on what was happening throughout the Antarctic Center.

With all modern forms of communication down, whatever information that trickled in and was disseminated through the Dream Realm was doomed to be incomplete, and often became obsolete on arrival. The lack of reliable intelligence was the worst fear of all armies.

The strange blizzard raging across the Antarctic Center was the cause of the collapse of the communication network. It was attributed to one of the Titans that had emerged around a month ago, designated as the Winter Beast. The Titan's current location was unknown, but its influence could be felt throughout the region.

The field army tasked with evacuating the Antarctic Center was in a rough spot. The southern reach of the landmass — where Sunny and his cohort were currently stuck — was lost and all but abandoned. People were scrambling to preserve the remaining six siege capitals, not knowing when and where the Titans would strike next.

Even worse, the Titans were merely the harbingers of a new phase of the Chain of Nightmares. The frequency and potency of the opening Gates seemed to have increased drastically, and countless Nightmare Creatures were pouring into the waking world every day.

…In other words, humans in the Antarctic Center were in trouble, and Sunny was in the biggest trouble of all.

'Wonderful.'

His soldiers had not only received information, but also reported the

cohort's current status and location. The information was going to take some time reaching Master Jet, and then more time would pass to get her response back to Sunny. For now, he had nothing to do.

Sunny contemplated for a few minutes whether he should start moving north immediately, or remain in place for a few days to give his soldiers time to recuperate and learn more about what was happening in the region. In the end, he decided to postpone the decision for when the second shift of sleepers returned from the Dream Realm.

Keeping the Rhino static in the open was not an ideal situation, but neither was blindly venturing into the mountains. Either way, there was a big chance that a disaster would find them, but at least the former choice gave his soldiers a chance to get back to their peak battle states.

There were also the two civilians to think about.

After Kim, Luster, and Dorn finished their report, Sunny moved to the compact kitchen of the large vehicle, summoned the Covetous Coffer, and concentrated on preparing a hearty breakfast for the crew of the Rhino. Cooking always made him feel calmer.

He wondered about a lot of things. How close was the Second Army to being assembled? What were the Great Clans doing? How hard would it be to reach the distant siege capital, which stood near Mount Erebus?

That city was famed for its rich geothermal fields. At least they would not be cold anymore after getting inside its walls.

He also wondered how Rain was doing. Was she worried about his long silence, perhaps? Was she in the midst of a First Nightmare?

He could visit the Ivory Tower and ask one of the cohort members to check up on her. Effie was quite close with Rain, and so was Nephis. Kai kept in touch with Aiko, who was responsible for taking care of Rain in Sunny's absence, and Cassie seemed to know everything about everyone, in general.

But no… he couldn't go right now. There was a difference between taking a nap and leaving for the Dream Realm. The former would make him several seconds late to react to danger, but the latter would make him miss it completely. With how dire the situation was, he could not allow himself to be absent.

Soon, the smell of cooking food brought everyone inside the Rhino to the lounge area. Even Professor Obel and Beth woke up because of it. Sunny secretly studied the old man, trying to ascertain his condition.

The Professor seemed to be holding up well, considering how sudden their departure had been. He still seemed ancient and fragile, but there were no signs of a sudden deterioration of his health. Nevertheless, Beth used a portable medical scanner to take a few readings, and then produced a batch of medicine pills and supplements from her bag, acting like a concerned nurse.

Sunny placed plates of fragrant curry on the table, as well as a pot of coffee and several bars of dark chocolate for the dessert. Considering their situation, this modest meal seemed strangely opulent.

Before eating, Professor Obel looked around with curiosity, then smiled and said in his usual friendly tone:

"That is an impressive machine you have here, Master Sunless."

Luster, who was already bringing a spoonful of curry to his mouth, paused and grinned.

"It is, isn't it? Of all the vehicles I've driven, our Rhino is the most fearsome! This one time, we had to plow through a whole swarm of low-rank Nightmare Creatures… ah, it was spectacular."

The old man smiled.

"It's good to see this design still being used and kept up to date. I knew the engineer who initially created this APC concept, you see. Of course, back then, it was far less advanced. Spelltech was not even in its infancy, so the solutions she proposed to make such a massive vehicle move at an acceptable pace were nothing short of revolutionary."

Sunny tilted his head, trying to imagine it. A world without spelltech… it was hard to conceive of such a thing.

And yet, Professor was obviously right. Just half a century ago, it had not existed.

'Huh.'

Everyone ate, knowing that they would need a lot of energy to face what was about to come. At some point, though, Beth threw a complicated glance at Sunny and asked:

"Now that things seem to have calmed down a bit… can you finally explain what prompted this sudden turn of events, Master Sunless? Why did we have to leave LO49 in such a hurry? Uh… not that I am doubting your decisions, though…"

He remained silent for a bit, sipping his coffee.

What was there to say?

Sunny shrugged.

"It's because the Ariadne was destroyed, and LO49 is gone. Everyone back there is dead. The nine of us are the only ones who survived."

Chapter-903: Abstract Numbers

His words caused a dead silence to settle over the Rhino. Luster, Kim, and Dorn froze, grave expressions appearing on their faces. Professor Obel looked down, suddenly appearing even more fragile and old. A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

Beth's eyes widened.

"W—what… what do you mean, dead? That is impossible."

Sunny looked at her silently, and then shook his head.

"This is the era of the Nightmare Spell. Anything is possible, and terrible things are doubly possible. In fact, they are all but inevitable. We were lucky to get out in time, but the others were not. That is all there is to it."

His voice was full of grounded confidence, but in fact, Sunny felt very unsettled. He was not entirely sure if he was trying to convince Beth, or himself.

Professor Obel, who had been born during the Dark Times and lived through the horrors of the First Generation, seemed to understand what Sunny was trying to say. He must have experienced many such calamities throughout his long life, and lost a lot of friends. His young assistant, however, did not.

Looking at Sunny with a pale face, she forced out:

"B—but…"

He interrupted her.

"Don't think about it too much. Concentrate on your own survival instead. We are not out of the woods yet, and what is to come is far

more important than something that is already over. And it is over."

With that, the conversation died down. The previous lively atmosphere disappeared as if it had never existed. Sunny studied the faces of people gathered in the lounge area, and then stood up.

He did not really want to console and manage anyone's feelings right now. They were all adults… actually, he was the youngest person here, so why was he the one who had to take care of everyone?

Well… because he was in charge, both in terms of power and authority. And with those, uninvited, also came responsibility.

'...Ugh. How irritating.'

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, and then said:

"The best way to honor those that are gone is to make sure that we don't follow them. So, rest well and gather your strength. I'll keep watch outside."

He sighed and walked away, leaving them behind.

Climbing to the roof of the Rhino, Sunny commanded Saint to dismiss Morgan's Warbow and summoned it into his own hands. Then, he shivered, enveloped by snow. Chilling wind howled through the rusted frame of the ancient war machine, the remains of which rose from the ground like the bones of a giant beast.

Even though staying outside was cold and uncomfortable, right now, he preferred it to being in the company of other humans. There was a lot for him to think about.

Observing the surrounding area through the senses of his shadows, Sunny closed his eyes.

There was no way back, and the path ahead was dangerous and unclear. Remaining in this spot was not at all safe, as well.

Funnily enough, the unnatural blizzard not only made it harder for humans to see the approaching Nightmare Creatures before they launched into a frenzied attack, but also hid them from the sight of

the abominations. Unless a swarm stumbled directly on the rusty wreckage, it would pass by this shelter without catching the smell of human souls inside.

That, at least, played in Sunny's favor.

Before he knew it, his thoughts wandered back to the lost personnel of LO49.

Fourteen hundred people… sixteen, even, if he counted those that had died in the weeks before. Just like that, so many lives had been lost.

It was… expected, actually.

With a strange grimace, Sunny remembered hearing about the Chain of Nightmares from Master Jet for the first time. Back then, he was rather callously indifferent. What did the fates of humans in Antarctica have to do with him? Their number was much higher than fourteen hundred, too.

There were seven hundred million people living in the Southern Quadrant, and he had not been inclined to give a damn about a single one. At least not enough to risk his life over it.

He was still indifferent.

Seven hundred million was too large of a number to conceive of. It was too distant and abstract. When speaking about millions of people, people stopped being people and turned into numbers. Sunny did not wish them ill, but he also could not bring himself to care about mere numbers.

But soldiers and civilians that had died in LO49 were different. Even though fourteen hundred could not compare to seven hundred million, to him, they were real. He had lived with them, shared bread with them, and fought side by side with them. He had come to know them as people, and not numbers.

So, their deaths affected Sunny much more than the potential evisceration of the whole quadrant. Knowing what he knew now, he couldn't help but see the First Army and its mission in a different

light.

…There would be much more death, for sure. The government had an ambitious goal of evacuating the whole continent, but their plan was already bursting at the seams. Many more people were going to die. Millions of them. In the end, how many of the seven hundred million would be saved? Six hundred?

Five? Even less?

Of course, he had no way of knowing.

So… how did it make him feel?

Was he outraged? Motivated? Burning with resolve? Did he find conviction?

Not really.

Letting out a bitter breath, Sunny whispered:

"Such a waste…"

All he felt was contempt. It was such a waste, all of it. Of human lives, resources, and potential. It made him sick to know that the world was gobbling up so much…

While the people who could have prevented it from happening were too busy fighting among each other. Those bastards.

In the end, all Sunny could do was follow his advice and concentrate on himself, and that which belonged to him.

He couldn't save seven hundred million people, but he could make sure that he, his soldiers, and civilians in his care would make it to the other side of this disaster alive.

That, at least, he could possibly manage.

Chapter-904: A Journey of a Thousand Miles

Two days later, they finally received a word from Master Jet. The message, which had passed through several people before reaching Sunny, was simple — retreat to Erebus and rendezvous with Davis and his cohort of Irregulars there.

Godspeed.

Sunny took a deep breath after hearing the news.

It was as he had expected, even though a small hope that some miraculous help would be sent to assist them on the thousand-kilometer journey had been still somehow aflame in his heart. Now, it was completely extinguished.

With that, the cohort's short period of rest was over. It was a good thing, too.

Over the past couple of days, Sunny killed several Nightmare Creatures that had wandered close to the camp. Strangely, there had not been as many of them as one would have expected, and he was quick to dispose of the bodies. Still, the smell of blood was slowly permeating the area, and pretty soon, it was bound to attract bigger threats.

The blizzard was still raging outside the wreck of the old war machine. Piercing the swirling snow with beams of light, the Rhino growled as it drove forward and abandoned its temporary shelter. Accelerating, it then moved north, toward the slopes of the towering mountains.

The atmosphere inside the vehicle was tense, but as minutes passed without anything lunging an unexpected attack on the APC, everyone

calmed down a little.

…Except for Sunny. He had no plans of calming down until they safely reached the stronghold of the First Evacuation Army. In fact, he would prefer if his people remained tense and paranoid, as well.

But there was such a thing as too much pressure, too. People tended to break if subjected to persistent and overwhelming stress without any chance to take a breath. Actually, his soldiers were holding up surprisingly well, considering everything they had gone through in the past two months... and for a good reason.

One of the criteria he had chosen these particular Awakened by was their mental resilience, after all.

Even Luster, who seemed like a carefree fool most of the time, was enduring the rigors of the calamitous Antarctica campaign with a surprising tenacity. Maybe it was exactly that lighthearted and frivolous personality of his that made the young man so immune to despair.

'...Do I need to learn from Luster?'

That was something Sunny had never expected to think about.

The Rhino drove forward, and, hidden by the veil of snow, Saint and Nightmare followed it from a small distance. Even though the mountains were obscured from view by the snowstorm, the jagged peaks were getting closer and closer. Sunny's shadows prowled outside, scouting the path ahead.

Just before they reached the terminus that separated the coastal highway, which stretched along the whole length of the Antarctic Center, from the road leading to the former LO49 and the path that took a turn to climb high into the mountains, one of the shadows noticed something strange in the snow.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, frowning. Then, he moved closer to the pilot's seat and spoke calmly:

"Turn to the left a little and slow down. We are going to take a stop in a couple of kilometers."

Luster obediently followed his instructions, gradually slowing down. Eventually, the massive vehicle came to a halt.

Sunny opened the hatch and dove into the blizzard, the polished black wood of the Cruel Sight's shaft falling silently into his hand. Struggling against the wind, he then walked forward and stopped in front of a tall pile of snow.

Less than a hundred meters forward was the terminus of the coastal highway, with several empty buildings standing with their doors ajar. Some distance away to his left was the ocean, which made Sunny feel very tense.

Right now, however, his attention was concentrated on the tall mound in front of him. Under a thick layer of snow, portions of a massive carcass could be seen. The Nightmare Creature had not been dead for long — a day at most, maybe two. From a cursory look, it had been a Demon, probably of the Awakened Rank.

Judging by the vicious wounds covering its body, it had not been killed by human weapons, and as if to illustrate that point, large sections of the carcass seemed to have been devoured.

'...Strange.'

Nightmare Creatures were known to fight amongst themselves on occasion, but only in the Dream Realm. Out here in the waking world, there were too many human bodies for them to tear apart, and too many human souls to devour. So, even when different tribes of abominations collided with each other, they rarely showed any sign of hostility. Hunting down much tastier prey always took precedence.

However… with how many Nightmare Creatures were currently rampaging across Antarctica, and how concentrated the human population had become due to being moved to a small number of siege capitals, things could have changed. If there were instances of infighting between the abominations, it could potentially help the mission of the First Army tremendously.

Of course, Sunny prevented himself from becoming too optimistic about that prospect.

He had more important and immediate concerns, anyway. A Nightmare Creature capable of slaughtering an Awakened Demon had to be sufficiently strong, and it could still be near. What kind of abomination was it, and where had it gone? Was it alone or accompanied by a whole swarm of other monsters?

If he managed to deduce something about the nature of the enemy from the corpse, he would be able to better prepare to deflect the threat.

Sadly, the dead demon did not offer any clues. The only thing Sunny found out was that the killer was not too fearsome, since there were signs of a furious confrontation all over the place. If the other party was truly powerful, their victory would have been entirely one-sided.

'Waste of time...'

Shaking his head, Sunny was just about to turn back when he sensed something through his shadows. One of them had glided a bit further up the highway, and was currently observing some disturbances in the blizzard.

He slowed down, turning to the north.

'...What is that?'

A moment later, a troubled expression appeared on Sunny's face.

Chapter-905: Bearer of Bad News

The shadow hid on the slope of a tall cliff, observing the wide highway that stretched north between the mountains and the ocean. The world was obscured by a white wall of snow, but it could feel slight tremors running through the ground.

Something was approaching.

A few moments later, two bright dots appeared inside the blizzard, slowly growing larger as their source drew closer. Then, powerful beams of light cut through the snowstorm, making the shadow shift its position.

…Several kilometers away, Sunny frowned with a troubled expression.

'People.'

What approached from the north was not a swarm of Nightmare Creatures or a lumbering monstrosity, but a small procession of civilian transports, accompanied by a handful of military vehicles. They cut through the blizzard, rolling down the highway at a slow speed. Several of them appeared battered and barely functioning. Soldiers could be seen manning the turrets, shivering in the vicious cold.

His scowl deepened.

'What are they doing here?'

"...Luster. Bring the Rhino to the edge of the coastal highway"

Leaving the carcass of the dead demon behind, Sunny walked

forward. A few minutes later, he was standing on the snow-covered surface of the highway, with the Rhino positioned behind him. His silhouette was drawn against the backdrop of the blizzard by the beams of two powerful spotlights.

The convoy was already close, but they did not notice him yet.

Striking the butt of the Cruel Sight into the ground, Sunny hesitated for a moment, and then activated the [Light Eater] enchantment.

Immediately, the silver blade of the spear shone with brilliant light. It was as though a small sun bloomed in his hand. Somewhere behind, Belle and Dorn emerged from the APC, carrying their weapons with guarded expressions. Samara had climbed to the roof of the vehicle and was now laying on it, resting her chin on the stock of her rifle.

The other three Irregulars remained inside, protecting Professor Obel and Beth.

The radiance of the Cruel Sight was too intense to not be noticed. Finally, the soldiers protecting the small convoy reacted, turning the turrets in the direction of the unknown threat. Their faces were tense and frightened. The lead vehicle slowed down.

'I hope those fools don't start shooting blindly…'

Using the Extraordinary Rock and its [Sonorous] enchantment, Sunny augmented the volume of his voice. Calm and oppressive, it rolled across the highway, easily breaching through the howling of the wind.

"This is Captain Sunless of the First Irregular Company. Think twice before you shoot."

Luckily, the soldiers seemed to have preserved at least some of their composure. No bullet flew in his direction… not that a mundane bullet would be able to do him serious harm, let alone scratch the surface of the Undying Chain.

A few minutes later, the lead vehicle of the strange convoy came to a screeching halt not too far away from the Rhino, forcing the transports to follow suit. A figure in a military uniform emerged from

it, hesitated for a bit, and then headed toward Sunny.

Judging by the lack of an armor-type Memory and the way the man was holding to the collar of his coat, shivering in the cold, he was a mundane human.

While the soldier walked, Sunny's shadows got closer to the convoy and studied it. The transports were full of frightened civilians, and their military chaperones were few and far between. Everyone seemed to be in a rough shape, tired, and numb. There were women, children, and elderly among the refugees, all scared and exhausted, but not a lot of men.

And there was not a single Awakened among them.

Sunny's mood turned darker and darker.

Finally, the soldier walked close enough to see him. Raising a hand to shield his eyes from the Rhino's lights, he mumbled in a startled voice:

"It really is the Devil…"

Sunny looked at him with a frown.

"I can hear you, you know."

The soldier flinched, and then lowered his hand, trying to stand at attention.

"Oh… sir! Sorry, sir!"

His voice, despite the effort to sound professional, seemed haunted.

Sunny sighed and shook his head.

"At ease."

Then, he looked past the man's shoulder at the battered convoy, wondering what it was doing here.

"Please explain who you are, and why you are in this area. I thought

that the First Army abandoned the southern reach of the Antarctic Center."

The soldier remained silent for a while. Eventually, he said:

"Sir, you must know that our division suffered heavy losses when… when the siege capital we were building was destroyed. A sufficient number of us had time to evacuate, taking the civilians with us. However, the aftermath was… chaotic."

Sunny did not know the details of how the city had been obliterated, except for that it had been done by a titan. Nevertheless, he could imagine the panic and mayhem that had ensued in the aftermath. He nodded.

The man let out a heavy sigh.

"Most of those who escaped retreated north, but for many of us, that direction was cut off. We gathered as many people as we could and eventually headed south…"

Something about that story did not sit right with Sunny. He interrupted the tired soldier:

"...You made it all the way here driving on the highway?"

Staying so close to the ocean was too dangerous. Even Sunny did not dare choose that convenient, but dire path. How did a bunch of mundane soldiers survive it?

The man's face grew bleak. He lingered for a while, and then said grimly:

"There were a lot more transports in the convoy at the start of it, Captain. This… this is just the ones that remain. I have three hundred and forty-free civilians in my care, and forty soldiers."

Sunny sighed.

"Ah."

Now, things were making much more sense.

Put in a somber mood, he asked:

"There were no Awakened assisting you?"

The soldier shook his head.

"There were. They stayed back to buy us time. That... that was a week ago, sir."

Sunny thought that he understood the full picture… except for one, most important, thing.

'Why come so far south?'

He stared at the man for a bit, and then asked directly:

"But why would you head here, of all places? Why not circle back and head north, to one of the remaining siege capitals?"

The answer soon came, making the corner of his eye twitch.

"Evacuation, sir. After the initial chaos died down, the Awakened escorts… they were still alive, back then… received orders through the Dream Realm. We were to proceed to a facility called LO49, rendezvous with the battleship Ariadne that is supposed to be waiting for us there, and escape. Although… we are a little late. Just, just by a day or two."

Sunny stared, lost for words. The soldier suddenly seemed excited:

"Captain Sunless, sir! Have you come from that facility? Were you sent to escort us the rest of the way?"

Exposed to that hopeful gaze, Sunny felt a bitter taste in his mouth.

He lingered with the answer, but his Flaw only allowed him to remain silent for so long.

…Eventually, he opened his mouth and said simply:

"No. The Ariadne was destroyed, and LO49 is lost. I am sorry to say this, soldier… but you and your men have made it all the way here

for nothing."

Chapter-906: Moral Conundrum

Sunny had never seen a few words crush a man's spirit so thoroughly.

…Except for maybe himself, when Nephis had spoken his True Name and commanded him to leave her for dead on the Forgotten Shore.

The soldier managed to remain standing, but he looked like a marionette with its strings cut. All light was extinguished from his eyes. He remained motionless for a while, and then turned slightly, throwing a forlorn glance at the small, battered convoy behind him.

Sunny could imagine how he felt. After surviving the cataclysmic destruction of the siege capital, these people weathered untold horrors to make it this far alive. What had kept them going was probably the hope that salvation was drawing closer and closer. And now, when they almost reached the destination, that hope was cruelly crushed.

He sighed.

"It just happened a few days ago. The news would not have reached you. My people and I are the only ones who survived."

The soldier looked down, silent.

Eventually, he asked:

"If I may ask. What are your plans now, sir?"

Sunny looked at him with a deadpan expression.

"My orders are to proceed to the Erebus Field siege capital to rendezvous with another cohort of the First Irregular Company."

Suddenly, a tentative spark appeared in the soldier's eyes.

"Master Sunless, sir. Will you consider…"

Sunny knew what he was going to say. It was not that hard to guess.

…He wanted to laugh.

In fact, he almost did. It took a lot of self-control to remain outwardly calm. A bitter, familiar, unhinged laugh got stuck somewhere in his throat.

Of course, Sunny knew. The soldier was going to ask if the Irregulars would escort the civilian convoy to safety. Why wouldn't he? They had persevered for the last week without any Awakened to protect the handful of transports from the rampaging Nightmare Creatures. And even though their hope of sailing to safety aboard the Ariadne was gone, there was an actual Master standing in front of them.

And not just any Master, but one of the most deadly ones in the First Army, accompanied by a cohort of absolute elites. The Irregulars were the cream of the crop of human forces. Surely, they wouldn't leave defenseless civilians behind.

Surely…

The problem was that this decision was not an easy one. Heavily armored and exceedingly maneuverable Rhino could potentially make the thousand-kilometer journey to Mount Erebus. The flimsy and damaged civilian transports, however… their ability to traverse the mountains was doubtful. At the very least, they would slow down and limit the versatile APC.

Which would put its crew in danger.

By agreeing to take charge of the convoy, Sunny would not only make his task several times harder, but also drastically increase the chance of his own soldiers dying.

That was why he wanted to laugh.

In Sunny's last conversation with Verne, the stalwart Master had told him that it was impossible to get hundreds of civilians through the mountains alive. Back then, Sunny had responded by saying that

people could not know what was impossible until they tried it.

And now, he had to either leave these people to die…

Or eat his own words, and put his money where his mouth was.

'Oh, this is a good one. This one is great! I see you, [Fated]...'

The soldier's words died on his lips as he watched Sunny's unmoving face. Sunny remained silent.

So, what was he supposed to do?

Was he supposed to take responsibility for hundreds of refugees, at the expense of his soldiers and Professor Obel? Or follow cold logic and do what had to be done, abandoning them to fate? No, but there was no need to hide behind words. There was no fate, in this case, only death.

What was the right choice?

A strange smile appeared on his face.

'What would a man of conviction do? Ah, a man of conviction would have probably stayed at LO49 and died. How complicated.'

Despite his aspiration to find the elusive thing called conviction and grow stronger through it, Sunny had not had any success in that regard yet. He still stood for nothing and was as unmoored as he had been at the start of it. Some people might have had an unwavering moral compass, but he was not one of them. Sunny mostly acted on a whim and pursued his own narrow interests.

In fact, simply hearing someone speak about morality always filled him with suspicion.

So, he did not have a straightforward answer to what was the right thing to do in this situation.

However…

However. Sunny might not have known what he believed in — if

there even was such a thing — but he knew what he despised very well. Just a few days ago, he had sat on the roof of the Rhino, full of contempt for the bastards who could have saved countless lives in Antarctica, but decided not to. The damned Sovereigns.

So, following that logic… wouldn't he be doing the same by leaving the refugees to die in order to serve his personal convenience?

'What a weird and perverted way of thinking about things.'

Sunny was honestly not sure about the validity of that conclusion, or if it even made any sense. But it was the best one he had managed to come up with.

So, after a long stretch of silence, he said:

"How much food and clean water do you have left?"

The soldier did not seem to understand his question. He stared blankly at Sunny for a few moments, and then perked up a little.

"We have a large surplus of both food and water, sir. That is one thing we don't lack… we also have a working water filter."

Sunny remained silent for a little while, and then nodded.

"Alright. Then you will follow us to Erebus Field. Do note that we will be moving through the mountains… don't worry, though. My cohort has scouted the road networks in this region of the Antarctic Center extensively. We'll guide you well."

The soldier took in a shaky breath and saluted.

"Yes, sir!"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"What is your name and rank?"

The man responded after a short pause, fidgeting with the collar of his coat:

"It's Sergeant Gere, sir."

Sunny glanced at the caravan of battered vehicles behind him, and sighed.

"Here's my order, Sergeant Gere. From now on, I'll be assuming command of this convoy. You did well getting them here. Leave the rest to me…"

Chapter-907: Burden of Command

As expected, the refugees were devastated by the news that their salvation had slipped away from their grasp at the last moment. Many of them looked like they were about to give up, but strangely, the terrible change did not end up being as crushing to their already crumbling morale as Sunny had thought it would be.

The reason… he was the reason. Or rather, his status and reputation.

Although being found by a Master was not really comparable to boarding a rescue ship, Ascended were a kind of symbol among humans. Saints were too mysterious and distant, so it was the Masters that dwelled in the human subconscious as the epitome of valor, achievement, and might.

Sunny did not know about valor and achievement, but Ascended were indeed immensely powerful. And he was more powerful than most.

So, when the refugees learned that Master Sunless of the First Irregular Company had taken command of the convoy, many of them were elated despite their extreme exhaustion. He had a fearsome reputation, after all… in fact, Sunny felt that the mundane soldiers had gone out of their way to embellish his achievements as much as they could when they delivered the news.

Their purpose was transparent — the soldiers, too, wanted to keep the morale of the civilians from reaching the very bottom of despair.

As a result, the refugees regarded him as some sort of intrepid hero, who was both the scourge of Nightmare Creatures and a dauntless savior of men. When they looked at him, their eyes were full of hope and reverence.

Sunny was weirded out by these gazes.

'Fools. How easy are you to deceive?'

Did they not hear the part of the story where a whole settlement that he had been stationed at was completely destroyed? But no, they didn't. People just wanted to believe in something that would give them solace, no matter how far removed from the truth their belief might be. It was strangely easy for them to ignore anything that conflicted with such a belief.

In the end, making people lie to themselves was the best and most effective kind of deception.

…Regardless, Sunny was not going to dispel their mistaken impression of him. Not only did it make the refugees easier to control, but there were other things to consider. Namely, the spreading plague of the Spell.

Now that Sunny knew that a First Nightmare was born of a tiny Seed, as well, he couldn't help but feel that it could only be planted into fertile soil. Wouldn't a soul that was full of fear and despair be more fertile, while one illuminated by hope less so?

If he thought about it like that, it was no surprise that the Nightmare Spell had descended during the height of the Dark Times. Back then, the whole world had been drowning in desperation.

Maybe by managing the morale of the convoy, he would be able to reduce the number of mundane humans succumbing to the Nightmares.

'Look at me, thinking strategically.'

Shaking his head, Sunny walked back to the Rhino and climbed inside. Remembering the mangled corpse of an Awakened Demon that rested under the snow less than a hundred meters away, he wanted to leave the terminus of the coastal highway as soon as possible… but there were a few things he had to do before that.

"Professor Obel, can I speak to you?"

The old man had lived through the havoc of the First Generation, so he would have valuable insight about the task facing Sunny, without a doubt.

And indeed, speaking to the Professor gave him a few good ideas. However, something like the Chain of Nightmares had never happened in the history of the world before, so there was no handbook on how to survive it. He had to come up with his own solutions.

Ten minutes later, Sunny gathered his cohort, as well as Professor Obel, Beth, and Sergeant Gere in the command suite of the Rhino.

He didn't waste any time and got straight to business:

"The situation is far from being perfect, so I'll be brief. Our first task is to inspect the vehicles of the convoy and service them as needed, to make sure that they will be able to make it across the mountains. However, we can't do it here in the open. There is an abandoned military bunker not too far from our position... if all goes well, we will reach it within a day and make camp."

His thinking was rather simple. He couldn't have the civilians sleeping in the cramped transports, since the consequences of someone turning into a Nightmare Creature inside one would be devastating. So, ideally, they needed to find a well-protected campsite every time they needed to rest.

The old bunker, which had stood empty since the Dark Times, was hidden in the mountains at a sufficient distance from the ocean. It was a good place to accomplish a lot of pressing tasks.

Sunny paused and looked at his subordinates with a grim expression.

"For now, we will assume a standard march formation. Our immediate task is to reach the bunker without suffering any losses. There are two types of threats we need to be wary of: those from beyond, and those from within. I won't say anything about the former, since they just mean that we must enter battle with the enemy. The latter, however… I want soldiers keeping eyes on the civilians at all times.

Don't let anyone fall asleep."

He lingered for a moment, and then added:

"Clear one of the transports completely and move all passengers to the other four. That will be our mobile infirmary. If someone does fall asleep, wake them up. If they don't wake, transfer the sleepers to the infirmary and get ready to put them down, should anyone fail the First Nightmare."

Sergeant Gere shivered, but remained silent. It wasn't easy for mundane soldiers to fight Nightmare Creatures, especially not without working exoskeleton armor suits and inside a moving transport with no space to retreat and maneuver.

Sunny had thought about it in advance. There were five civilian transports and four smaller army vehicles escorting them, so the math wasn't too hard.

He looked at his soldiers.

"Luster will drive the Rhino, while each of you is to be stationed inside one of the transports from now on. Keep the refugees safe and observe your surroundings. If the convoy is ambushed and the enemy gets past me, it's your job to make sure that no one dies… or at least as few of them die as possible. Belle, you will watch over the infirmary. The others, divide the transports among yourself.

Sergeant Gere, the crews of the military vehicles will be responsible for themselves. The same protocol applies."

The soldier nodded.

"Yes, sir."

After that, they all stared at him in silence.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What are you waiting for? Go! I want to get off the coast as soon as possible."

Chapter-908: Delegation

After a short stop, the battered convoy started moving once again. The Rhino was driving at the front, followed by the five civilian transports. Two military vehicles flanked them, and two more protected the rear. It would not be possible to maintain the formation higher into the mountains, but for now, the roads were wide enough.

Taking a turn, they drove away from the coast, slowly climbing higher and higher into the outskirts of the mountains. Observing the multitude of screens in the command suite of the Rhino, Sunny felt thankful for the fact that he had scouted this whole area with his shadows a month ago, while en route to LO49.

He roughly knew the twists and turns of the mountain roads, the shape of the slopes and the deep canyons, and what path to take. He knew where the most dangerous spots were, where a large-scale ambush could be waiting for them, and where it was possible to make camp.

This stretch of the mountains was like a maze, and with civilian transports following the Rhino, its mobility was severely reduced. There were only so many paths the convoy could take… luckily, Sunny remembered them all.

Of course, a lot of things could have changed in a month. The devastating battle between the three Saints and an unknown Titan had destroyed a few mountain peaks further up north, and caused a powerful earthquake. Although only a weak echo of that clash had reached this region, it was still enough to potentially change the topography.

There would be rockfalls that had blocked previously clear roads, while some roads would have simply broken down and collapsed. A glacier or two could have come undone, obliterating everything in their path. And, of course, there were swarms of Nightmare Creatures

lurking in the dark.

There was also snow. The blizzard seemed to be growing weaker, but it had already covered the world with it. As a result, the Rhino was forced to lower its wedge-shaped ram and clear the path forward for the convoy. Just like that, the proud war machine was reduced to playing the role of a snowplow.

The progress was torturously slow.

Sunny had to simultaneously scout ahead and think deeply about how to manage the convoy. He wanted to consider as many problems as possible before they actually happened, to hopefully prevent them. It had been easy to command a small cohort, but now hundreds of people were depending on him. The complexity of the task and the amount of moving parts comprising it were giving him a headache.

Not to mention the daunting trial of daring to guide a caravan of refugees through a war-torn, apocalyptic expanse of the continent that was being slowly devoured by the inescapable tide of darkness.

'...At least there is no giant tower this time.'

Sunny smiled bitterly and turned his head, staring at Beth, who was looking at the external camera feed with a detached expression.

Feeling his gaze, she looked back.

"...What?"

Sunny studied her for a few moments.

"Beth, you have administrative experience, right?"

The young woman frowned in confusion.

"Sure? I used to do that sort of thing on behalf of the Professor. Running a research facility demands a lot of paperwork, you know."

He nodded.

"Good. Then, congratulations. You're in charge of the refugees now."

Beth blinked a couple of times.

"What? Wait… what do you mean?!"

Sunny shrugged.

"I mean that you are responsible for their well-being. Food, water, health, morale. Find responsible people among the civilians and coordinate with them to solve any problems that you can handle yourself. Report the rest to me. You will be a filter between me and the civilians, understand?"

She scowled.

"I do, but my priority is the Professor."

Sunny shook his head and waved a hand dismissively.

"He's a civilian too, is he not? Now that we are escorting a convoy of refugees, it's in your own interest to make sure that everything is running smoothly. The safer the convoy is, the safer the old man will be, as well. In any case, I need to delegate these things to someone.

Otherwise, I won't be able to concentrate on the military side of things, and our safety — including the Professor's — will be compromised. Would you prefer I entrust the civilian side of things to someone who does not care about him as much?"

She glared at him for a few moments, then scoffed.

"Fine. I guess I'll be the housekeeper, then. You be the guard dog."

Sunny grinned.

"That sounds swell. From what I hear, all dogs do is sleep all day and get treats. Who wouldn't want to live like that?"

The young woman gave him a strange look, and didn't answer.

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Above a mountain road that clung to the side of a canyon, a tall cliff

stood, covered in snow. On a deep ledge cutting into its face, veiled by darkness, a dozen monstrous forms lay as they hid from the howling wind.

The Nightmare Creatures were resting, their bloodshot eyes staring aimlessly into the blizzard.

Then, something changed.

As if catching a faint smell, the abominations stirred. Their maws opened, and their muscles rolled under the desiccated hides. One by one, they rose from the snow and listened.

From a distance, a barely audible hum of engines and the rustle of wheels could be heard. Frenzied flames ignited in the eyes of the vile creatures, and hoarse growls escaped from their maws. Using their powerful limbs, the Nightmare Creatures moved toward the edge of the ledge, lusting to sink their fangs into human flesh.

…Before they could, however, a shadow suddenly moved between them, and something landed in the middle of the pack, sending snow flying into the air. The abominations only had a moment to see what it was.

There, between them, a graceful knight in intricate onyx armor stood, raising a beautiful jade jian. A split second later, the white blade flashed.

…Back inside the Rhino, Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, listening to the voice of the Spell whispering into his ears. The convoy was climbing higher into the mountains. They moved slowly, but had not encountered any serious problems yet.

A few minutes later, he suddenly received a radio transmission from one of the flanking vehicles.

"M… ster Sunl… ss, sir!"

Sergeant Gere's voice came through, marred by interference. Sunny manipulated a few switches to improve the quality and asked:

"What is it? Is there danger?"

The man answered after a short pause, with doubt in his voice.

"No… yes. I don't know, sir. It's just that the cliffside ahead… there's blood flowing down it."

His voice sounded nervous.

The response came a second later, startling the soldier.

"...Don't mind it. The situation is under control. Keep your eyes open and move forward."

Gere stared at the radio in his hand, and then glanced at the soldier near him.

"He said that the situation is under control."

The other soldier shivered.

"...Then I guess it is."

They approached the cliffside that seemed to be seeping blood, and drove past it. Nothing happened.

A few more hours passed, full of similarly strange events. However, no abomination had managed to get close enough to the convoy to pose a serious threat to it. In the evening, when the blizzard had grown thin enough to see the stars in the sky, they finally reached their destination.

Up ahead, hidden between tall cliffs, was the entrance to the old, abandoned bunker.

That was going to be their base for the next couple of days.

Chapter-909: Underground Nest

During the Dark Times, humanity had come to the brink of destruction. A series of cataclysmic natural disasters had brought it to its knees, causing several waves of mass migrations, each of them accompanied by plagues and famine. Previously arable lands had turned into wastelands, and many resources that had previously been the lifeblood of civilization were suddenly running dry.

There had not been enough food for everyone, not enough livable space for everyone, and not enough energy for everyone. So, humans had done what they knew best.

They had turned to war.

…The marks left by those devastating wars still haunted the planet. From the polluted air to the derelicts of broken military machines, they littered the Earth like scars caused by a deadly infection. The old bunker Sunny was facing right now was one of those scars.

He knew neither what army had built it and for what purpose, nor what had happened to those people and why the bunker now stood abandoned. He also did not care.

There were always stories about terrifying doomsday weapons hidden in such places, waiting to be unleashed by a carefree explorer, but most of them were just that — stories. In reality, places like that one were usually empty for one simple reason: everyone had died or left, and those who survived had no need and no capacity to return.

Plus, the bunker had already been unsealed a long time ago. Its massive blast doors stood open, covered with snow.

Sunny was much more worried about the present than the past. Anything could have made its way inside during the Chain of Nightmares. If a tribe of Nightmare Creatures had made a nest in the

narrow underground passages, laying siege to the bunker would not be easy. In fact, it was as tough of a task as a military unit could get.

But he could not turn back.

The civilian transports were crowding the mountain road behind him, with nowhere else to go. The vehicles needed maintenance and repair, and the people inside needed rest. It was his responsibility to provide for them.

Looking at the dark entrance gloomily, Sunny turned and addressed his cohort:

"Prepare yourself. The seven of us will enter the bunker in fifteen minutes."

Sergeant Gere, who stood nearby, hesitated for a few moments.

"Sir… what if there are Nightmare Creatures inside?"

Usually, the task of clearing an underground nest would only be entrusted to a much larger and better prepared force. Sunny stared at the soldier silently, and then shrugged.

"There are. So what?"

His shadows were already creeping through the dark bunker, scouting its many chambers and passages. There were indeed abominations hiding underground… a lot of them. They had turned the abandoned complex into their lair some time ago, and its nature was going to make any potential assault both hard to pull off and bloody.

For a regular military force.

Sunny and his people, however, were elites. He was confident in their ability to clear out the bunker without suffering any losses. They had no other choice, anyway.

Most of his confidence, though, came from himself.

As minutes passed by, Sunny used his communicator to project an

image on the snow and started to slowly fill it out as the Irregulars watched attentively. Passage after passage, room after room… soon, a detailed map of the bunker was projected in front of them.

Then, Sunny marked every Nightmare Creature and its position on the map. Lastly, he sketched a rough figure of a snake-like monstrosity and drew several red dots on its body. Those were the weak spots he had observed with Kim's help.

Sergeant Gere stared at the projection, dumbfounded.

…Not paying him any attention, Sunny addressed the Irregulars:

"There are ninety-four Nightmare Creatures inside the bunker, as well as several hundred… eggs. The plan is simple. We'll go in and clear them all out, level after level. The first two levels only have Awakened abominations, and the heart of the nest seems to be situated on the fourth, with several Fallen protecting it. There's not a lot of room to move, so mind the walls. Sam, leave the rifle behind.

It won't be of any use underground, anyway..."

He spent the remainder of the fifteen minutes going over the important points and explaining what kind of enemy they would be facing.

Then, without any fanfare, the cohort brandished their weapons and entered the bunker, disappearing into the darkness without a single radiant Memory illuminating their way. Hidden in the shadows, Saint and Nightmare remained outside to guard the convoy.

An underground nest was always a dire target. The lack of light, the unpredictable nature of the terrain, the twists and turns of narrow passages that could lead to an ambush at any second, the limited space that made it hard to move and fight… it was a nightmare for a cohort of Awakened, especially if the abominations had both the numbers and the home ground advantage on their side.

…It wasn't too hard for the Irregulars, though, because they knew where the enemies were, what the lay of the land was, and had already developed an optimal plan of attack. Even if something

unexpected happened, Sunny's shadows were keeping an eye on everything, so the cohort would know about any potential attack in advance.

Swiftly moving from room to room, from corridor to corridor, they methodically slaughtered the Nightmare Creatures. Despite being inside a beast lair, it appeared as though the abominations had found themselves inside an enemy stronghold instead. The Awakened seemed to know the structure of the bunker better than its current inhabitants, as well as how to separate, flank and box the monsters in.

There were no unnecessary movements, no words spoken. The Irregulars were fast, efficient, and deadly. Belle especially seemed to be born for this type of assault, since he could freely phase through walls and attack from any angle. His sword made short work of the monstrous snakes, striking precisely at the vulnerable sections that Kim's Aspect had pointed out.

Sunny was in full control of the situation. His shadows spread throughout the underground complex, informing him of the movements of the enemy. Whenever there was a possibility of danger appearing, his spear lashed out, obliterating the threat. Whenever there was a change, he adjusted the plan on the fly and informed his soldiers.

They went through the first level like the Reaper's scythe, cutting down all living things on it, then did the same on the second.

Then, the third.

In the end, not even the Fallen abominations could do anything. The last rabid assault of the Nightmare Creatures was completely dismantled by an essence trap that had been set up by Samara. Whoever survived the blast was finished off by the melee fighters.

Just like that, the deadly nest of powerful abominations was obliterated.

As soon as the last of the creatures lost its life, shadows surged across the underground complex, dragging the corpses away to hide them

out of sight.

…About an hour after the cohort had entered the bunker, Sunny emerged from the darkness and breathed in the cold air. Then, he looked at the soldiers waiting outside and calmly said:

"Bring the transports inside."

The soldiers stared at him for a few seconds in silence, then turned around and walked toward the vehicles without saying anything.

...What was there to say?

Chapter-910: Master of Cartography

The old abandoned bunker was not exactly the best place for a few hundreds of exhausted refugees to rest, and that had been before Sunny and his cohort had smeared monster blood all over the place. It was dark, cold, and in no way suited for people to live in.

And yet, there was no other choice. They needed a temporary shelter to prepare for the journey ahead, and there was nothing better than this derelict facility for dozens of kilometers around.

In the end, the civilian transports and the military vehicles entered the large hangar behind the blast doors, and the refugees disembarked, throwing frightened gazes at the dark interior of the bunker.

The rest was both simple and demanded a lot of work.

Six comparatively clean rooms were designated as living areas, each welcoming around seventy residents. Lighting fixtures were installed, and heater elements were taken off the vehicles and placed in the corners to chase away the cold. Awakened were assigned to the living quarters to keep people safe.

There was so much to do that Sunny was momentarily at a loss. People needed blankets, food, medical care, and a hundred other things that he had not stopped to think about. Luckily, he did not have to solve all these problems alone. Sergeant Gere already had sufficient experience taking care of the refugees, and Beth seemed to have taken on her responsibility as the civilian representative with zeal.

After about an hour of working things out, Sunny was left mostly alone. In the morning, there would be a lot to do, but for now, people

just wanted to rest. No one knew when they were going to get a chance to leave the transports again.

Sunny himself chose to watch over the infirmary, sending Belle away to a less stressful post.

Currently, there were three people inside — two refugees and a young soldier. All three slept as their souls wandered in the First Nightmare. Their shallow and rare breaths were almost inaudible.

Glancing at them, he summoned his chair, sat on it, and prepared for a long night. Unlike the rest of the convoy, Sunny would not be resting any time soon. There was too much for him to do.

He closed his eyes.

Above ground, the blizzard finally subsided, and the dark canvas of the mountains could be seen once again. The eerie lights of the aurora danced in the black sky, making it seem as though it was aflame with ghostly fire. Distant stars burned coldly up above.

'What a sight…'

Sunny relaxed as his shadows climbed four different peaks. Now that the blizzard was gone, he could finally observe the surroundings. He could control his shadows from as far as thirteen kilometers or so.

Of course, that number seemed small compared to the thousand kilometers the convoy had to travel to reach the Erebus Field siege capital… but here in the mountains, where the terrain was rough and uneven, that was enough.

One could see a lot, if they just climbed high enough.

Naturally, trying to study the landscape from the summit of a tall mountain would have been hard for most people, considering that the whole continent was obscured by the veil of impenetrable darkness. The long night of Antarctica was still lingering, and would be for several more months.

But Sunny could pierce through that veil with ease. To him, that darkness was an ally.

As the first shadow reached sufficiently high, he sighed and opened his eyes. Then, he activated his communicator and projected the map of the area from its memory storage.

'So outdated…'

If Sunny wanted to guide the convoy through the mountains, he had a lot of tedious work to do.

First, he recalled the journey to LO49, and started to mark all the old roads that he had scouted back then on the map, as well as their condition and degree of disrepair. Some were too damaged for the civilian transports to drive on, some were comparatively fine, and some could be used, but only if there was no other option.

In the process, Sunny also marked all points of interest — potential campsites, possible ambush spots, entrances to the old tunnels that could be hiding untold threats, and so on.

The process was long and boring, but the result was going to allow him to plan a good route.

After a while, feeling tired, Sunny glanced at the map and sighed. Its current state was satisfactory, as the starting point.

Then came the harder part.

Relying on the four shadows looking at the world from high above, he started to add changes to the map. Some roads had been destroyed in the past month, some were blocked. Whole areas were buried under ice after several glaciers rolled down from the mountain peaks, and everywhere, Nightmare Creatures prowled.

Due to his credentials as an academic explorer, Sunny was not a novice to drawing maps, although they had all been that of the Dream Realm in the past. The more he filled in the current one, the more bleak his expression became.

Things were not looking good, at all.

There were too few paths the convoy could take, and none of them was particularly easy or safe. The sheer number of abominations

flooding the mountain range was appalling. Even though Sunny could not judge their exact numbers and power from afar, there were too many.

They were like maggots swarming in dead flesh.

Nevertheless, he diligently marked the larger swarms on the map, as well as the direction they seemed to be heading in and their approximate speed.

After hours of arduous work, the projection in front of him looked like a piece of psychedelic art, with a chaotic net of lines and symbols of different colors covering its surface.

The most prominent color, however, was red.

With a sigh, Sunny leaned back and remained motionless for a while.

'What a disaster.'

It would have been much easier to slip through the hordes of Nightmare Creatures if he only had to worry about the Rhino. The APC could conquer all types of terrain and was as durable as they came. The vehicles of the convoy, however… Sunny felt as though he had gone into battle with his hands tied behind his back.

'Curse it all…'

As Sunny was pondering the optimal course of action, there was a sound of footsteps in the corridor outside, and the door of the infirmary slowly opened. Behind it, Professor Obel stood, holding a plate of food in his hands.

Sunny raised an eyebrow, surprised by the unexpected visit.

"...Professor? What brings you here?"

The old man smiled.

"Ah, don't mind me, Master Sunless. I just noticed that you have not gotten your portion of the food the soldiers had cooked for us, so I thought to bring you some."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

'What a thoughtful old man.'

Something told him that the Professor had not just come here to give him food. Considering how much time had passed, the old man should have been asleep. It was also strange to see him without Beth, who always followed him like a shadow.

The question was, what did Professor Obel want?

Chapter-911: Question of Value

"Come in."

The old man entered, closing the door behind him. Then, he looked around, found a rusty stool and sat down, handing Sunny the plate.

"Sorry. It's not much."

Indeed, it wasn't. The broth the soldiers had cooked was made out of synthpaste, monster meat, and spices. It was a common army dish that could be made with all kinds of ingredients, as long as there was water and basic rations at hand. This particular version looked almost edible, too.

Sunny shrugged.

"That's alright. I'm from the outskirts of NQSC, so… I'm not a stranger to synthpaste."

Professor Obel nodded, then curiously studied the map Sunny had created as he ate. After a while, the old man said:

"It is in moments like this that I am reminded of how potent Utility Aspects can be. Their wielders tend to be overlooked in favor of combat specialists, who get all the glory. But your ability is truly incredible. Someone more versed in battle would have been able to kill a few dozen more Nightmare Creatures… maybe even a hundred or two.

But with this, we will be able to sneak past thousands of them, and defeat those that we do encounter with minimal losses, or none at all. This map will vastly increase our chances of survival, more than any warrior would be able to."

He paused for a moment and looked around.

"...This bunker, too. Your soldiers are a fearsome bunch, Master Sunless, but without your sight and awareness, liberating this outpost without casualties would have been a tall task even for them. You seem to be able to see everything, and be in several places at the same time. I think I owe my life to that last ability of yours, actually."

Remembering the bloody incident that had happened in the safe room of LO49, Sunny swallowed a spoonful of broth and nodded.

"That is a lot of compliments. Don't be mistaken, though. I am a menace in battle, too."

Professor Obel chuckled.

"I am just giving credit where credit is due. You might have not realized it, but you are uniquely suited to lead this convoy, Master Sunless. Still, it is a lot of responsibility, especially for a young man such as you. How are you holding up?"

Sunny stared at him blankly.

"...I am fine, thank you. I've been through worse."

The old man sighed.

"I'm sure that you have."

His tone seemed strangely regretful.

'What is he getting at?'

Sunny frowned, then asked frankly:

"Professor… I am sure that this is not just a social call. What is it that you want from me?"

Professor Obel remained silent for a few moments. Eventually, he smiled:

"I guess I am really easy to read, huh? Comes with the territory, I guess. At my age, people don't have time for pretense. Yes, you are right. I wanted to talk to you about something, Master Sunless… or

rather, I have a favor to ask."

He looked at Sunny with a fatherly expression — which was an entirely new experience for Sunny — and said:

"There is a long road ahead of us. In the future, you will have to make a lot of decisions as the leader of this convoy. Our lives are literally in your hands, Master Sunless… so, I wanted to ask you in advance. If a time ever comes when you have to decide between saving my life and that of someone else — especially my assistant Beth, that stubborn child — I want you to choose against me.

Keep someone else alive and leave me behind."

Sunny stared at the old man for a while, perplexed by the sudden request.

"With all due respect, Professor, I can't agree. My orders are to deliver you safely to a siege capital… you, and you alone. Everyone else is just a bonus. They don't have the same value."

Professor Obel simply shook his head.

"Value… you are wrong, Master Sunless. I am old, and don't have much time left. It is young people like you and Beth that hold true value. I might have done a few worthy things in the past, but you are the ones who will accomplish great and amazing feats in the years to come. You will carry the flag of humanity into the future... not old fossils like me.

If a species starts to cannibalize its young to prolong the lives of the old... there's no value in that. None at all."

Sunny looked away.

"...That's great, but I am not even sure if humanity has a future."

The old man laughed.

"Oh… forgive me, young man, but I've been hearing these words for almost a century. When I was young, many people were convinced that we were all going to go extinct soon. But we didn't. Then, they

went around saying that if things did not change for the better, humanity would surely be doomed. Things changed for the worst, but humanity still persisted.

Then, the Nightmare Spell appeared, and it seemed like all their fears came true… and yet, here we are. Still kicking. Humanity is far more tenacious than you think, Master Sunless."

…That it was. Humans were incredibly adaptable, resourceful, and stubborn creatures. They tended to cling to life so ferociously that eradicating them was often a futile endeavor.

But not always.

Sunny glanced at the Professor darkly.

"Humans that used to inhabit the Dream Realm were tenacious, too. Where are they now?"

The old man did not seem to have an answer, so he just sighed dejectedly.

After a while, he asked:

"So, are you going to grant my wish or not?"

Sunny remained silent for a bit. Then, he scoffed.

"Why do I have to choose whom to keep alive? I'll just make sure to save everyone. There's no need to decide between you and Beth, so why would I?"

Professor Obel looked at him with a slightly somber expression.

"That might be an unreasonable ambition, young man."

Sunny shrugged, his expression nonchalant.

"This whole campaign is an unreasonable ambition. Should we just give up?"

The old man studied him for a while, then suddenly smiled. His

smile, for some reason, seemed a bit brighter than usual.

"Indeed, that is also true…"

At that moment, Sunny glanced at the three people sleeping in the infirmary and frowned. His eyes seemed to grow a little darker.

Deactivating his communicator, he looked at Professor Obel and said in a calm tone:

"I think it's time for you to go, Professor. I have… some matters to attend to. Thanks for the food."

The old man lingered for a moment, but then nodded and stood up. As soon as the door closed behind him, Sunny summoned the Moonlight Shard and walked over to the Sleepers.

It seemed that two of them were about to wake up. Whether as people or Nightmare Creatures, though…

That, Sunny did not know.

Chapter-912: Soul of a Man

The first infected was a young soldier from Sergeant Gere's unit. The other two were refugees — a man in his thirties and a woman who seemed old enough to be Sunny's grandmother.

All three were outside the usual age for a Sleeper, but the soldier, at least, was young and strong. He had a higher chance of survival, from what Sunny could tell… not that anyone knew a lot about how and why people survived the First Nightmare.

It was a mystery why the Spell had eventually settled for teenagers of about sixteen to eighteen years old after devastating the First Generation indiscriminately.

But even back then, younger people had been more likely to survive. Humans might have not known the reason, but they were very good at gathering statistics.

Perhaps it had something to do with the soul. Some believed that it was hard for a soul to form a stable core after becoming set in its ways… so, a situation was possible where an older person could survive their Nightmare, only to die anyway after their soul collapsed while trying to create a core.

'That hardly seems fair…'

But fairness was a human concept, in the end. The Spell had its own principles, which did not always coincide with what humans considered just.

…Currently, the soldier and the male refugee were stirring, as if on the cusp of waking up. Sunny observed them from above, holding the Moonlight Shard in his hand.

He was strangely fascinated.

To his eyes, the changes happening to the souls of the Sleepers were revealed in detail. The weak, faint golden light inside them was swirling and moving, caught in the throes of a growing turmoil.

Sunny had gone through the process himself, many times. However, he had never seen it happening in front of him, to someone else.

Right now, the souls of the two humans were weak and… insubstantial. They were more like an idea of something than an actual thing. They were alive, and had shadows, but that was pretty much it. However, through a mysterious process, the formless state of a mundane soul was being galvanized, slowly creating a more solid shape.

A soul core was not a soul. Rather, it existed within the soul, serving as both its fulcrum and nexus. At least that was how Sunny perceived it. Encompassing a core granted a lot of benefits to a soul, but it also placed a burden on it. Not every soul was powerful and vast enough to sustain one, let alone several.

The proof of it was the terrible pain he went through every time his Class rose.

Regardless… both the soldier and the civilian seemed resilient enough for the task at hand. The faint golden light saturating their bodies grew slightly brighter, and in it, streaks of a stronger radiance appeared. These streaks flowed to their chests and swirled, slowly merging into spheres of brilliant light. The whole process seemed miraculous.

As the two spheres grew fuller and more defined, the familiar shapes of two soul cores started to emerge from the brilliance.

But then, there was a change.

The nascent soul core of the young soldier exploded with a flood of ethereal flame, which rolled through his body as a radiant wave, rejuvenating it.

The civilian, however…

As Sunny watched with a bleak expression, a seed of darkness

appeared in the center of the forming core. It quickly expanded, spreading like a cancerous growth. Repulsive veins of darkness spread through the dying light, consuming it.

The more of the light was consumed, the faster it spread.

'...Corruption.'

Sunny was almost certain that this was what he was observing. A living being succumbing to the Corruption. The Corruption had existed long before the Nightmare Spell, and although he did not know its source and purpose, he knew that it was an enemy.

The enemy, perhaps.

Sunny suspected that he had once come very close to becoming corrupted himself, on the second level of the Ebony Tower. The terrible rot that had eaten through Weaver's arm and forced the cunning daemon to sever it… had it not been the same thing, only in a far more pure and harrowing form?

As Sunny watched, revolting tentacles of the Corruption spread through the body of the man, becoming one with it.

Then, the body started to change.

The skin turned dark, and the teeth suddenly elongated, piercing through his lips. The bones cracked, rearranging themselves…

Before anything else could happen, though, the narrow blade of the Moonlight Shard pierced the man's chest, going straight through his heart. The forming soul core, now parasitized by the Corruption, was torn apart. The grotesque body convulsed and grew still, its last breath escaping as a hoarse groan.

Sunny sighed and looked at the dead man with regret.

After a while, he whispered:

"Rest well, now. Your Nightmare is over…"

'Find peace within me.'

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then glanced at the other one. Everything seemed to be going fine for the young soldier. His soul core was all but formed, as there were faint streams of weak essence coursing through his body. The body itself was being rebuilt by it, growing healthier and stronger… getting one step closer to perfection.

Before too long, the convoy would welcome another Sleeper.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then dragged his chair closer and sat down, dismissing the Moonlight Shard. Several shadowy tentacles rose from the ground and dragged the corpse of the unfortunate refugee away.

Come to think of it, they were not too practical for such tasks… a simple tentacle was the easiest shape to create and demanded the least essence to maintain, but came short in terms of function and versatility. Maybe he needed to come up with a better shape.

In any case, for now, all Sunny could do was wait.

Suddenly, he felt very tired.

By that time, the first of the shadows had already returned from its trip to the peak of a nearby mountain, so he closed his eyes and observed the infirmary through it.

A minute passed by, then another. Then, a few more. Everything was quiet.

…Some time later, the soldier slowly opened his eyes. A hint of consciousness returned into them, and the young man looked around in confusion.

The scarcely lit room, the rusted metal walls, the three makeshift cots, one of them drenched in blood… and a pale youth sitting on a luxurious wooden chair, as if on a humble throne.

The youth seemed almost like a human… was he human?

His eyes were closed. Was he alive, or was he a corpse?

…Was he both alive and a corpse?

And that moment, Sunny said:

"What are you looking at?"

The soldier flinched away. Then, shivering, he asked something stupid:

"...Am I dead?"

Sunny frowned.

Well, it was not surprising that the guy was confused. He had been lost in the First Nightmare for several days. For all the poor fool knew, the convoy should have been still driving toward LO49, racing to rendezvous with the Ariadne. He had slept through the meeting with the Irregulars, Sunny assuming command, and the short journey to the bunker.

To him, everything would appear strange and frightening.

With a sigh, Sunny opened his eyes, leaned forward… and then slapped the soldier across the face. Not too hard, but just enough to feel it.

As the young man yelped and grabbed his cheek, Sunny shook his head.

"Would it hurt like that if you were dead? You're not lucky enough to die, fool. Welcome back to the waking world, Sleeper… uh... whatever your name is..."

Chapter-913: Lucky Sleeper

The Devils were the only Awakened in the convoy, so the newly returned Sleeper had no one else to learn from. After finding out that the young soldier's Aspect had to do with melee combat, Sunny sent him to Belle and told the swordsman to show him the ropes.

The Sleeper was in a strange position — he was not a mundane soldier anymore, but also not a true Awakened. He had an Aspect, an Ability, and was capable of summoning Memories. However, his power was barely enough to face a dormant Nightmare Creature, and potent Memories with active enchantments were wasted on him.

'Whatever. I was killing Fallen Devils left and right as a Sleeper…'

Sunny sneered.

Of course, no matter how much he wanted to, he could not hold everyone to the standards of the Forgotten Shore survivors. Everyone who had escaped from that hell was abnormal, and for every one of them that had, there were hundreds of those who had not.

In any case, the Sleeper was at least capable enough to watch over the refugees, lessening the burden on the Irregulars. To make his task easier, they had bestowed a few Memories to the young man. Now, he was wearing sturdy snakeskin armor and wielding Belle's spare sword.

He even had an enchanted bow and a quiver of poison arrows, as well as a magical lantern and a charm that protected him from cold.

If there was one thing the Irregulars did not lack, it was Memories of lower Ranks. Pretty much every battle they fought resulted in one or two of them receiving something. Most of these Memories were useless to the members of the cohort, whose equipment had been of high quality even before Sunny improved it, but they were just right

for a new Sleeper.

There was enough to arm several more, even.

Come to think of it… Sunny had been mostly paying attention to the human toll that the rampant proliferation of the Spell had levied, but there was another side to the epidemic devouring Antarctica, as well. Before too long, there would be a lot of Sleepers like that one on the continent. So many, in fact, that their numbers could potentially rival that of the Evacuation Army in the future.

…That belated realization gave him pause.

Those were thoughts for the future, however. For now, he only cared about the convoy and its fate. The convoy was not going to have thousands of Sleepers protecting it any time soon, but there might be enough of them to form a cohort of their own one day.

'Well… I better tell Belle to do a good job of mentoring that guy, then.'

With that, he threw the thoughts about the Sleeper out of his mind, for now. There was a lot to do, and not enough time to do it all.

In the morning, Sunny sent Quentin, Samara, and Kim to take a look at the vehicles of the convoy. Each had to be inspected, serviced, and hopefully repaired well enough to make the journey to Erebus Field in one piece. At the same time, he assigned Dorn and twenty of Gere's soldiers to explore the bunker and see if there was anything inside that could be recovered and used for their benefit.

The underground complex had stood abandoned for half a century, at least, but there was a possibility that a few intact pieces of machinery remained, ready to be cannibalized to repair the vehicles. There could also be untouched caches of preserved provisions, and so on, not to mention the carcasses of Nightmare Creatures that needed to be dressed and dismantled.

Every member of the cohort already had their cores saturated, so there was no better use for all the remaining soul shards than to feed them to the rookie Sleeper. Just like that, the young soldier was

going to consume hundreds of soul fragments in his very first day after returning from the Nightmare.

'What a lucky bastard…'

Recalling how arduous it was for him to get even a single fragment on the Forgotten Shore, Sunny listened to Beth with a dim expression. She was in the process of reporting what state the refugees were in, which, if put succinctly, was… not too good.

Well, what else had he expected? It was already a miracle that these people were holding on to their sanity. Many of them were the most vulnerable members of humanity, too — children and elderly. The shock of watching their whole continent go up in flames right in front of them was not something one could endure without paying the price.

With a sigh, Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffer and started unloading the precious things he had stored inside in preparation for the Antarctica campaign. Quality food, sugar, salt, spices, dried fruit, chocolate, tea, coffee, toiletries, expensive alcohol for special occasions, and much more… he had prepared a lot, thinking that this stash was going to last the cohort at least a year.

There was even foldable furniture, a spacious field tent, and a few things to make leisure time between missions more enjoyable.

Beth watched more and more items appear from an average-sized chest with wide eyes. Sunny, meanwhile, felt extremely bitter.

The mountain of supplies was large enough to fill an entire room. Not too long ago, it seemed like a lot… but with hundreds of mouths to feed, it was barely enough to sustain the refugees for a few days.

However, the supplies were not meant to sustain them. Sergeant Gere had that covered, even if all the civilians had to eat was synthpaste broth, and all they had to drink was filtered water. Rather, Sunny's pile of treasures was supposed to achieve something different… improve their mood, even if just by a bit.

Enduring the apocalypse was much more bearable if you had some

toothpaste and a clean toothbrush. Although that statement seemed nonsensical and foolish, it was nevertheless — somehow — true. Sunny had experienced the fact himself.

"Here. Talk to Gere and distribute this stuff among the civilians. Tell the cooks to step up their game, too. I want the next few meals to be really tasty… until we leave the bunker, at least."

Beth, who was staring at a pack of cheap scented soap as if mesmerized by it, slowly nodded.

"Ah… yes… I will… huh…"

Sunny sighed and clicked his fingers a few times, fruitlessly trying to get the young woman's attention.

'Damn. Do I need to slap her, too?'

Chapter-914: Moving On

In the end, they stayed in the derelict bunker for three days. The vehicles of the convoy had turned out to be in a worse state than Sunny had thought, so it took a lot of work for Kim and Samara to get them in shape with Quentin's help.

The patchwork repairs they implemented were not pretty, but at least the transports were not going to fall apart on the road, stranding dozens of refugees and bringing the convoy to a halting stop.

In the freezing cold of the polar night, stopping meant death. That was without even considering the swarms of Nightmare Creatures prowling in the dark... the world itself was more than happy to kill them.

Throughout these few days, Sunny continued to monitor the surroundings and diligently update his map. The four shadows spent a lot of time either climbing mountains or hiding on their icy summits. He knew for a fact that shadows did not experience getting cold… and yet, Sunny could not shake the feeling that the gazes they threw at him from time to time were less friendly than usual.

'Tough… do as you're told and don't complain, bastards.'

He was not a very friendly person himself.

The days spent in the bunker were strangely uneventful. There were no large hordes of Nightmare Creatures in close proximity to it, yet, and whatever small swarms passed by were not strong enough to pose a serious threat.

If they did attack, the abominations would have a hard time assaulting the underground complex — its defensive capabilities, which Sunny and his cohort had braved themselves while clearing out the snake monsters, were now on their side.

No one would find it easy to get to the civilians.

…Unless they were capable of burrowing through the ground, of course, like the monstrous lieutenant of the stone hive that had almost buried Sunny in solid stone. If they were, the bunker would become nothing short of a free buffet for such a Nightmare Creature.

After thinking about that, Sunny ordered Luster to remain in the Rhino and monitor the seismic sensors like his life depended on it.

But no dangerous abomination appeared.

When Sunny was free, he silently patrolled the bunker, studying the refugees. These people seemed strange to him. After losing their homes, loved ones, and having the promised salvation be ripped out from their hands — twice — he would have expected many to break. And some did… but very few.

For most, life simply went on. Especially the children. The last thing Sunny had expected to hear in the gloomy corridors of the abandoned bunker was the sound of laughter, but nevertheless, there it was. Kids were playing around, watched over by the elderly. They ran around, made friends, and invented various games to chase away the boredom.

One even had the gall to slam directly into him while chasing after their playmates. The boy let out a startled yelp, then looked up with wide eyes and mumbled:

"Uh… sorry, Uncle Awakened…"

With that, he rubbed his forehead and dashed away, giggling.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'...Uncle? Uncle?! The… the nerve!'

Who was he calling an uncle?!

...Kids were doing fine, but even the adults, pressed down by the burden of knowledge, showed pale smiles from time to time.

They were warm, had both water and food, as well as a temporary, but safe shelter. That was all it took for the human spirit to hold on, it seemed.

Maybe Sunny himself had something to do with their mood, as well. The refugees decided to trust in the competence of the Master who had taken charge of their survival. They surrendered their fates into his hands, and, unburdened, found enough strength to believe in the future, even if only a little.

'Strange. So strange. I would never entrust my life to anyone…'

At the end of the third day, Sunny gave the command to start preparing for an immediate departure. That decision was met with a lot of turmoil, both from the civilians and the soldiers. Even his own men spoke up.

"Sir… if I may."

Samara gestured to the ramshackle vehicles, slight concern apparent on her usually nonchalant face.

"We have done a lot, but I am not sure how well our repairs will hold. If you give us two more days… maybe even one… we'll accomplish much more."

Beth and Sergeant Gere were similarly in favor of postponing the departure by a few days.

"The people are just starting to come to their senses. A few more days of rest will do wonders for both their mood and their health. We have a lot of old people here, you know? They require care…"

But Sunny was adamant. He simply shook his head.

"You don't get it. We must leave now. There is a huge horde of Nightmare Creatures moving in from the east, and another one coming down from the north. If we go now, we'll have a chance of slipping past them before they arrive. If not, we'll simply drown in abominations. Do you actually think that they won't find us underground, or that seven and a half Awakened can stop them?

Wake the hell up and start loading people into the transports. That's an order."

No one could challenge his authority, and no one had any reason to. While hard to accept, his words were true… which was to be expected, considering that Sunny could not lie. He would have loved to lie and manipulate these people, but sadly, he could only manipulate them by telling the truth.

Weirdly enough, he was starting to earn a reputation of a rough, but fair leader as a result.

Who could be more dependable than the Devil, after all?

After three days of rest for some, and back-breaking work to prepare the convoy for the journey ahead for others, the small fleet of vehicles finally left the hangar of the old bunker.

The blizzard had yet to come back, so their position was instantly revealed to everyone who would bother to look. Cutting the darkness with beams of bright light and tearing the silence apart with the rumbling growls of powerful engines, the convoy moved north.

Their long journey had begun.

Chapter-915: Fool's Errand

In the cold darkness, a small procession of vehicles was climbing an old and battered mountain road. The road clung precariously to the stone slope, so narrow that the wheels of the transports barely fit on its cracked surface.

Looking through the windows to their right, all the refugees could see was a sheer drop. It was as though they were driving on nothing, a few centimeters away from plummeting to their deaths. From time to time, a stray rock would be pushed off the road by the wheels of the slowly moving vehicles, and then fall down, ricocheting off the cliffs with startling clangor.

The sound traveled far through the deep gorge, reflecting from its stone walls as it grew louder and louder. For the frightened refugees, it seemed as deafening as thunder.

Their fear was only made worse by the darkness. The headlights of the transports cut wide swaths through it, but beyond that, the night was impenetrable and oppressive. The drivers were already struggling with keeping the vehicles on the narrow road, and with most of it obscured by the chilling gloom, their task seemed all but impossible.

Traveling through the mountains at night was an ill-advised and perilous affair. It was a fool's errand.

'...Who's the fool, then?'

Studying sensor feeds in the command suite of the Rhino, Sunny was mentally calculating the rate of their progress. No matter how he thought about it, the convoy's speed was appallingly slow.

Sadly, it couldn't be helped.

The powerful APC was moving at the head of the column, clearing the path for the other vehicles. Its ram was lowered and once again serving to push through the snow. From time to time, the Rhino had to remove other obstacles from the road, as well — stone debris, large boulders, and massive chunks of ice that had split from the glacier at the peak of the mountain.

It was doing a good job of it, for the most part. Very rarely did they stumble on something that the Rhino could not move through or push away. In these instances, the whole convoy had to come to a halt and wait for Sunny to remove the obstacle that the APC could not handle safely with his own two hands.

The Rhino was a powerful machine, but it could not compare to the might of a Master. There were very few things that Sunny could not throw off the road, and even if there were, he would simply cut through them with the Sin of Solace. The jade blade of the beautiful jian was sharp enough to cut through granite as if it was water.

Not that he enjoyed listening to its invasive whispers.

In any case, each such stop made their already slow progress even slower. The darkness, the cold, the precarious nature of the old mountain roads, the rough state of the area after the recent earthquake… none of it was making Sunny's life easy.

And that was just the natural side of things. Of course, there were other threats around them, as well…

The whole region was teeming with Nightmare Creatures.

For now, Sunny had managed to lead the convoy past the large swarms of abominations, but it was only a question of time before they had to fight. With how much noise they were making and how much light they were producing, it was inevitable for something hungry to notice them.

Some already had, of course. However, Saint had been able to kill the few solitary Nightmare Creatures without drawing too much attention. Sunny was using her as an outrider, so she traveled apart from the convoy to intercept any emerging threats before they could

deal damage to the transports.

He did not know how long her protection would last them, though. Sunny felt as though the envelope of safety around the convoy was getting smaller and smaller.

…At least he and his soldiers could see through the darkness. If they were as blind as the mundane soldiers protecting the convoy, Sunny would have probably gone mad by now. As it was, he remained surprisingly calm and analytical.

To him, the situation was both simple and unreasonably difficult.

There were two types of things at his disposal. One of them was assets — Saint and Nightmare, himself, the Irregulars, and the mundane soldiers. The other was dependents — the refugees, as well as Professor Obel and Beth.

There were also four types of danger facing him. One was the Nightmare Creatures, whom he had to track through his shadows and either avoid or slay. The other was the threats from within — people succumbing to the Spell or going mad, which he could mitigate through various measures. The third was the environment itself.

The world could easily kill them without even needing the help of the abominations, but that could be dealt with, as well.

And finally, there was the fourth kind of danger, the most dire one — the unforeseen threats. That one could not be preempted, dealt with, or mitigated.

Sunny's task was simply to apply his assets in the correct way, in order to protect his dependents from the danger. However, even if he made all the right decisions, nothing stopped a new Gate from opening right in the middle of the convoy, so… there was that to think about, as well.

'Great. And on top of it all, we're too slow.'

Not only was the convoy too slow to escape from an attack if need be, they were also desperately behind schedule. At that rate, the refugees would have to spend a night or two inside the transports

instead of a comparatively safe campsite.

'Well... there's nothing I can do about that, for now.'

If he had better vehicles... if he had more Awakened... if there were more tools at his disposal...

Sunny sighed. There was no point in thinking about such things.

At that moment, his expression slightly changed.

Sunny looked to the side, as if piercing the hull of the Rhino with his gaze.

There, several kilometers ahead… the slopes of the gorge came together, forming a small valley with a frozen lake taking most of its surface. A swarm of Nightmare Creatures had just appeared from behind a tall rock protrusion and was descending toward the lake.

And on the other side of the valley, still hidden from sight by the slope of the mountain, there was another swarm, this one smaller, but composed of much more powerful abominations. They were heading in the same direction.

What Sunny had feared came true. The convoy could not turn back, and would not be able to avoid colliding with the two swarms. A fight was inevitable.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

Standing up from his seat, Sunny stretched his limbs, and then glanced at the Irregulars with a deadpan expression. His people instantly tensed.

"Summon your weapons. It's time to get some fresh air…"

Chapter-916: Divide and Conquer

From what Sunny had seen, each of the two groups of Nightmare Creatures was about as strong as the swarm of eyeless abominations his cohort had eradicated at the very start of the Antarctica campaign. The first swarm consisted of about two hundred creatures, most of them Awakened, with several dozen Fallen leading them.

The second was further away and much smaller, with no more than fifty creatures comprising it. However, all of them were Fallen, and there were four Corrupted among them.

Fighting each of the swarms separately would have been hard, but not impossible. But if they were allowed to join forces… Sunny did not know what would happen then.

There was a faint hope in his heart that the Nightmare Creatures would obliterate each other, but he knew that it was too improbable, at that stage.

Whatever animosity there was between these two tribes of abominations could not compare to their frenzied desire to devour humans, and with hundreds of defenseless civilians close by, that bloodlust was already starting to flow like fire through their veins.

A battle was inevitable.

The question was… how was he supposed to go about fighting that battle?

The best possible solution would have been to stop the onslaught of abominations near the convoy, on the narrow mountain road. There was no space here for the enemy to exploit their overwhelming numerical advantage, so the defenders could face them a few at a

time.

However, Nightmare Creatures were not known for their reason and strong sense of self-preservation. They would madly press on, potentially burying Sunny and his cohort in an avalanche of bodies. It would not matter how many of them ended up being cut down or falling into the abyssal chasm of the mountain gorge, as long as some could sink their fangs into human flesh.

Additionally, he did not know what strange powers the abominations possessed, so he could not guarantee that the convoy would not sustain damage.

But most importantly…

Sunny simply could not let the two swarms merge. The only chance of a swift and decisive victory he saw was to obliterate them before that happened.

Which meant that the Irregulars had to advance and face the enemy on the wide, open battlefield of the valley ahead. They had to either destroy one swarm before the second arrived, or somehow engage both at the same time. Otherwise, a lot of people would die.

'Curses…'

The Rhino had already stopped, forcing the vehicles moving behind it to follow suit. The APC's width blocked pretty much the whole road, so they couldn't move past it even if they wanted to. Sunny and his people had to climb to the roof through one of the upper hatches, and then jump down.

Before too long, Gere's distorted voice came through the speakers of a portable radio:

"Captain Sunless? Is there another obstacle?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then responded in a measured tone:

"Negative. There's trouble ahead… deploy your soldiers and prepare to defend the convoy. My cohort will advance to engage the enemy,

but if something gets past us, it will be up to you and your men to stop it."

Sadly, Gere couldn't do much. There was the lone Sleeper, and a small amount of charged ammunition that Samara had supplied to the soldiers before leaving the bunker — the charge wasn't supposed to have dissipated completely yet, so they had a few hours left to make use of the few enchanted bullets.

However, that was pretty much it. Without even the powered exoskeleton armor suits, mundane soldiers were no match for Nightmare Creatures above the Dormant Rank.

Gere's answer came after a few seconds of silence.

"...Understood."

'What to do, what to do…'

Looking ahead, Sunny feverishly went through numerous scenarios, calculating risks and trying to come up with a way out of the dire situation, one that would not spell disaster for the convoy. No matter how he looked at it, something had to be sacrificed to balance the scale in their favor…

His mind was running on all cylinders, but failing to come up with a decision.

Soon, he gritted his teeth and commanded the Irregulars to advance. They dashed forward, braving the snow in cold silence. It did not take long to reach the small valley. They managed to arrive at its edges before the first swarm of Nightmare Creatures had time to descend from the mountain, but just barely. There was maybe a minute or two left.

The second swarm was still some distance away, hidden behind a tall slope.

In front of them was a large, empty space. It was covered with snow and almost perfectly flat… that was because most of the valley was taken by a mountain lake, which was frozen now that the long night had come to Antarctica.

This was where they were going to fight. Soon, the pristine surface of the snow would be painted by blood… hopefully, of Nightmare Creatures, but maybe that of humans, too.

Sunny ordered his soldiers to hide behind tall boulders and climbed on top of one. Then, he summoned Morgan's Warbow and closed his eyes for a moment.

He was just not strong enough. There were just too few assets at his disposal. This damned war was just too unfair.

Someone had to stop the larger swarm, and someone had to stall the smaller but more powerful one. Someone had to advance, while someone had to stay back and defend the convoy. There was simply no way to achieve all these goals without suffering a loss of something, and even though Sunny knew what decision he had to make, it was not easy to make it.

'...Sorry, Saint.'

His loyal demon would have to pick up his slack and face the second swarm with just Nightmare by her side. He could not even spare a shadow to reinforce them. One was watching over the convoy, and he needed the other three himself.

Saint had always been an outstanding warrior, but even she was not capable enough to handle fifty Fallen and three Corrupted abominations alone. The black steed would be of help, of course, especially now that he had subjugated a lot of nightmares, but still… the odds were not in their favor. If left to face the enemy alone, both Shadows would eventually be destroyed.

That was why speed was of the essence. If the Irregulars handled the larger swarm fast enough, they would be able to come to Saint's rescue.

If not…

Sunny would have to either risk losing his Shadows, or dismiss them and compromise the lives of the Irregulars, who would then be attacked from two sides.

"Kim, I need your help."

With a grim sigh, he raised his bow and pulled on its string.

Chapter-917: Black Tongues

A black arrow noiselessly flew through the darkness of the moonless night and disappeared into white snow without a trace. Then, another. Sunny tried to send as many arrows flying as he could before the swarm arrived.

In the end, he managed to draw his bow fourteen times.

Knowing that he would have to — and, hopefully, have time to — rescue Saint, he had chosen to wear the Mantle of the Underworld into the upcoming battle. The Dying Wish was already fused with it, but Sunny had not poured his essence into the Transcendent charm yet, not wishing to draw attention to himself.

For now, he was just a black silhouette on the dark backdrop of the night, almost unnoticeable if not for the pale radiance of the crimson aurora that swirled above, devouring the skies with its ghostly light.

Soon, the swarm descended into the valley.

The Nightmare Creature were bestial in appearance, with dirty fur and emaciated, gaunt frames that brimmed with feverish power. Their snouts were long and narrow, revealing hungry maws with black tongues and countless fangs, all sharp enough to cut through metal.

The Fallen abominations were especially ferocious. Their lean bodies were twice the size of Nightmare and had bloody bone protrusions rising from the patchy fur, like morbid armor. Their tails resembled slithering snakes, and their long black tongues were dripping with venomous saliva.

Sunny had not encountered this type of abomination before.

Two months into the Antarctica campaign, the First Army had

learned a few things about the Chain of Nightmares. Despite all the precautions, many Awakened had been pulled into the Dream Realm by the Call… most of them never returned, but two or three managed to locate the Seed and survive its trial, thus becoming Masters.

They had all brought the same story back. There was a previously unknown region of the Dream Realm where countless Nightmare Seeds seemed to be blooming, sending myriads of Nightmare Creatures into a frenzy. It was a vast desert covered by eerie ruins, with a giant black pyramid sometimes appearing on the horizon like a dreadful mirage.

Considering that most of the Gates originated from the same cursed land, it was no surprise that the Nightmare Creatures arriving into the waking world through them were also often similar. The First Evacuation Army had battled the same tribes of abominations many times. The Eyeless, for example, were a common sight throughout Antarctica, so humans had developed methods of dealing with them.

…But these Black Tongues were new. Sunny had never seen or heard about them before.

'Come down, you bastards.'

Lowering Morgan's Warbow, Sunny crouched and disappeared into the embrace of the shadows. Surrounded by them, he was all but invisible… which was good, because he did not want the abominations to notice him yet.

Following his command, the members of the cohort were also hiding. Even if it meant giving up the opportunity to bombard the Nightmare Creatures with ranged attacks during the approach, Sunny had ordered them to wait for his signal.

Seconds passed torturously slowly. The wind howled through the mountains, bringing with it the fetid smell of blood and rot. Cursing silently, he gritted his teeth.

Somewhere not too far away, Saint and Nightmare must have already engaged the second swarm. Sunny had expected to hear a litany of furious howls, but to his surprise and unease, all he could hear was

the wind.

Three of his shadows were with him, wrapped around the bow, while the fourth one was with the convoy, so Sunny could not even see what was happening behind the mountain slope. The lack of information was driving him insane, and his muscles ached, begging him to explode into action.

But, following the plan, he forced himself to remain motionless.

Sunny needed the whole swarm of Black Tongues to descend into the valley before he launched his attack.

'Hurry, you damned wretches! There is no way you have not seen, heard, or smelled the convoy! Aren't you hungry for some delicious human flesh?!'

After a minute or so, the last of the abominations finally reached the flat surface valley. The mass of bestial bodies flowed south, aiming to cross the frozen lake. They were clearly moving with purpose, aware that there was prey nearby.

'Nearer than you think…'

Sunny waited until the swarm reached the middle of the lake, and then finally started to act.

Concentrating, he poured his essence into Morgan's Warbow. However, he did not draw the string again…

Instead, he activated the [Burden of Peace] enchantment, causing the fourteen arrows he had sent flying earlier to suddenly become unbearably heavy.

Maintaining and controlling so many arrows at the same time was not an easy task, even for him. Sunny had to test the limits of his essence control and concentration to achieve what he wanted. It felt like he would cough blood and faint soon…

But in the end, Sunny had passed that test.

Each of the arrows had sunk into a weak spot of the ice sheet

covering the lake, which he had found with Kim's help. Now that all fourteen of them were suddenly bearing down on the ice with crushing weight…

The ice started to crack.

Slow at first, and then faster and faster, a net of cracks spread under the snow, as if a massive pane of glass was breaking. An indescribably beautiful sound of shattering ice drowned the howls of the wind for a few moments, and the Nightmare Creatures tensed.

But it was too late.

Before they could do anything, the surface of the lake beneath their feet broke, sending hundreds of abominations into freezing cold water. Instantly, the vast space of pristine snow was no more, replaced instead with a scene of utter havoc. Massive pieces of ice were collapsing and overturning as countless Nightmare Creatures fell into the utterly black, unbearably cold water below.

They struggled to climb back onto something solid, but there was nothing to support their weight anymore. The whole swarm was being swallowed by the lake.

…Of course, cold water was not going to kill a Nightmare Creature. They weren't going to drown, either. If need be, the abominations would swim to shore or simply walk on the bottom of the lake until they reached the surface again, breaking through the ice on the other side. For monsters like these, being thrown into a freezing lake was a small hindrance, at most.

Letting out a low growl, Sunny rose to his feet and drew Morgan's Warbow once again. This time, a different kind of arrow appeared on its string…

A strange arrow that looked like a caged bolt of lightning.

Wrapping three shadows around the [Strike of Thunder], Sunny did not bother to aim and simply let go of the string, sending the Ascended arrow into the middle of the lake.

The moment the furious bolt of lightning touched the surface of the

water…

There was a blinding flash, and Sunny was momentarily blinded.

Before he regained his sight, the voice of the Spell spoke into his ear like a choir:

[You have slain a…]

[You have slain a…]

[You have slain a…]

[You have received a Memory…]

[You have received a Memory…]

[You have slain a…]

[You have slain a…]

Chapter-918: Voiceless Wraiths

The Spell kept whispering, the rich tapestry of its voice creating a strange harmony with itself. The result was almost distracting. Sunny instantly lost count of how many creatures he had killed with that single arrow, but it seemed to be… seemed to be close to a hundred, at least.

The swarm was nothing short of decimated. Half of the Black Tongues were dead, and the remaining half were fried and damaged to different degrees. The water of the mountain lake, which had been freezing cold just a few seconds ago, seemed to be boiling.

He had also been lucky enough to receive a bunch of Memories. Even if most of them came from Awakened abominations… Saint was definitely going to eat well tonight.

If she survived, that is.

…Before Sunny could come back to his senses, the familiar electric whine reached his ears. Samara was already aiming her heavy rifle. Its muzzle flashed, and in the next moment, the head of a wounded Fallen abomination that was trying to climb onto a large piece of ice exploded into bloody chunks. A split second later, Kim's carbine was firing, too.

'Right…'

Any other Master could have probably spared a few moments to appreciate the unbelievable feat of slaying a hundred powerful Nightmare Creatures in less than a second, but Sunny did not have such luck. He was still racing against time, and there was still an entirely different swarm of abominations for him to fight.

The pristine white expanse of the mountain valley was gone. Instead, all he could see was black water with charred corpses floating in it,

and scores of viciously burned Nightmare Creatures feverishly trying to get to the shore.

Abandoning their attempts to climb onto the ice, they were diving down into the lake instead, to travel across its bottom. Since electricity only spread over the surface of water, summoning the Strike of Thunder for the second time was not going to do him any good.

Glancing at the macabre scene, Sunny turned his head and spoke:

"Dorn, I'll leave you in charge. The bastards sustained a lot of damage, and will be vulnerable while trying to break through the ice. Have Samara take out the strongest ones, and finish off the rest as they come up with Belle and Luster."

The giant man nodded, staring at him with a very strange expression.

"Understood. But, Captain… what about you?"

Sunny was already jumping off the boulder.

"I'll go deal with the second swarm!"

Dorn blinked.

"...There is a second swarm?"

Sunny did not hear it, though. Turning into a swift shadow, he flew through the darkness as fast as he could, rushing to the spot where he had sent Saint to.

'Hold, hold, hold… hold just a little bit more, Saint, I'm coming…'

Soon, he crested the sheer wall of the mountain slope and froze for a moment, looking down.

Far below, in a narrow ravine, a furious battle was taking place.

The Nightmare Creatures resembled grotesquely tall humans with inky black skin, sunken eyes, and motionless faces. They were wearing strange armors forged out of dark metal, and wielded no

weapons. However, Sunny had a strong feeling that being touched by their empty hands would be the end of him.

Their mouths... were also sewn shut.

'No wonder there were no howls.'

Saint was the silent type, and these wretches were the same.

She was currently facing three of the four Corrupted abominations alone. Corpses littered the ground, and the Sin of Solace danced, deflecting one blow after another. The taciturn demon had abandoned her usual grounded style, and was now fighting with composed, but desperate urgency.

Looking at it, Sunny could not help but be reminded of the first time he met the living statue, back on a desolate plaza of the Dark City.

Back then, the original Stone Saint had slain several creatures of a higher Rank, at the cost of her life.

The fourth Corrupted was wandering aimlessly, straining to rip the black threads piercing its lips open. Inky blood was smeared all over its eerily still face. The creature's mind seemed to be gone, shattered by the cursed blade… however, Saint was also wounded, ruby dust flowing through the cracks of her onyx armor.

She was slowly losing strength…

Some distance away, Nightmare was holding back dozens of Fallen abominations. The black steed rampaged in their midsts, using its iron hooves, bestial strength, and wolfish fangs to tear them apart. His body was wreathed in shadows, with two crimson flames glowing furiously through the haze of darkness. The black steed looked like an incarnation of fear and dread.

But he was not doing well, either. For now, Nightmare was able to stay ahead of the enemy due to his overwhelming speed, but he could not allow the abominations to swarm Saint from the back. Every time they tried, the dark courser had no choice but to give up his advantage and put himself between the voiceless and his rider.

His sides were torn, and there were strange marks lingering on his sable coat, glowing with ghostly blue light. Around these marks, Nightmare's flesh seemed to be rotting.

The two Shadows were no match for the swarm of dreadful abominations, which seemed to have come from a Category Three Gate. They could escape from the voiceless wraiths, but they could not defeat them… only be defeated. Saint and Nightmare only lasted this long because of the perfect combination of their innate abilities and the Memories Sunny had entrusted to his Shadows.

Saint was using the Broken Oath, which continuously weakened and damaged the Corrupted. She also wielded the Sin of Solace, which was a Transcendent weapon that possessed an insidious power. That power came at the cost of dealing mental damage to its wielder, which Saint was immune to.

A combination of soul damage and mind damage was truly a formidable one, especially when paired with her sublime mastery of the sword.

Additionally, the Sin of Solace possessed the [Omen of Dread] enchantment, which caused fear to poison the minds of its enemies. That enchantment augmented the potency of the [Mantle of Fear] and [Dreadlord] that Nightmare possessed, making the black steed more powerful the more he was feared.

In the past, that seamless synergy had never failed. But today, it was not enough.

…Well, that was before Sunny himself was added into the equation.

Dashing toward the ravine, he sent his senses forward.

The voiceless abominations were strong enough to bully his Shadows…

But how long would they last now that the Master of the Shadows had arrived?

Chapter-919: Defying Gravity

Flying down the slope of the mountain, Sunny left the shadows and did something that would have usually been considered a very stupid move in a battle — he leaped into the air, soaring high above the ravine, and then plummeted down.

Experienced warriors all knew that performing a jump in combat had no benefit, and instead left one open to a potentially lethal attack. Worst of all, the jumper had nothing to use as support, so dodging or changing direction to avoid the strike was all but impossible.

It even prevented one from performing a truly powerful attack, since power was born from the ground beneath the soles of one's feet and traveled all the way up through their body, to the tip of their blade.

However, desperate times demanded desperate measures.

Falling, Sunny strained his muscles and drew his bow. Even that was much harder in the air, but he managed somehow.

As wind whistled in his ears and the ground rushed toward him with frightening speed, he opened the floodgates of essence and activated two enchantments.

One was [Death Dealer] of Morgan's Warbow.

The other was [Feather of Truth] of the Mantle of the Underworld.

…Below, Saint was desperately fighting three Corrupted abominations. Her armor was covered by a net of cracks, and fine ruby dust was flowing through several of the breaches.

The enemy was on the verge of overwhelming the stalwart knight.

But then, an arrow that seemed to be forged out of pale gold flashed

through the air and struck one of the tall Nightmare Creatures in the shoulder. The force carried by it was so great that his dark armor exploded into shards, and the arrow's sharp broadhead sunk into the flesh beneath.

No, more than that…

The abomination's whole arm was cleanly severed, taking a big chunk of the shoulder with it. Dark blood splattered on the snow as the Corrupted was thrown off balance, staggering back. The sight of it was both gruesome and spectacularly morbid.

...And a moment later, Sunny landed on another Voiceless like a cannonball. There was no sophistication in this attack… he had simply turned himself into a living, breathing torpedo. Making the Mantle of the Underworld weigh several tons with the help of the [Feather of Truth] and enlisting the help of gravity, he fell from high above and crashed right on top of a Corrupted Demon assaulting Saint.

The result was… earth-shattering.

The towering abomination was not exactly flattened, but it did topple like a house of cards, its armor bending and breaking. Both of them hit the ground with a deafening bang, Sunny on top. Something snapped with a nauseating crunch. The stones beneath them violently cracked, and a cloud of snow was thrown into the air by the shockwave.

Sunny was tossed aside and bounced off the ground before coming to a halting stop. If not for the Bone Weave, his neck would have been twisted at an unnatural angle...

'...'

But he was seemingly alive, and even in one piece.

'...Ouch.'

Just like that, in less than a second, two of the three Corrupted abominations were severely wounded and debilitated. However…

That was just the opening act of Sunny's arrival. Luckily, what came next did not require his active participation. It was a good thing, too… since he was not capable of doing anything at the moment. He needed a second or two to come back to his senses.

…Maybe three.

Two shadows burst from his body. One of them wrapped itself around Saint, while the second one flew toward Nightmare.

The next moment, Saint's armor shone with dark radiance, and the ruby flames of her eyes slightly changed hue. Although Sunny was momentarily stunned, she was not. More than that, she did not waste even a split second, using the opening he had created for her to instantly launch a ruthless attack.

Radiating a sense of newfound power, the taciturn demon exploded forward. Before the disoriented Nightmare Creatures could react, she descended upon the Voiceless that Sunny had sent crashing into the ground. The Sin of Solace flashed, sliding through the wide crack in the damaged armor and piercing the demon's heart, then emerged from his back in a rain of blood.

As Sunny was struggling to stand up, the Spell whispered:

[You have slain a Corrupted Demon, Voiceless Prelate.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have received a Memory…]

That was all he needed to hear to regain his bearings and shrug off the disorientation. The world had stopped spinning. Everything hurt, but… what else was new?

The Cruel Sight was already weaving itself from a tenebrous mist, a second or two away from manifesting into reality.

Sadly, he did not have those seconds.

A black hand was already stretching toward him, its grasp promising nothing but suffering and death. Ghostly blue light was swirling

beneath the inky skin.

Instead of Sunny's throat, the hand was met by the blade of the Moonlight Shard. The long stiletto pierced the palm of the abomination and then twisted, tearing it open. The ghostly light flowed out of the wound, clinging to the transparent blade, but failed to do any damage to it.

The cadence of the battle had drastically changed.

Before, Saint was fighting alone against three Corrupted abominations. Now, only two of them remained, and one was missing an arm, bleeding profusely from the terrible wound.

She was also not alone anymore. Sunny was by her side.

And the two of them…

Sunny pitied the fools who would choose to oppose them.

The Corrupted were strong and menacing, but they lacked the skill and tenacity of the Master and his Shadow. They also lacked a crucial quality — the ability to fight as one, seamlessly cooperating to achieve the result that was larger and more lethal than the sum of its parts.

Sunny and Saint, though… they had that quality in spades. They knew each other so well that there was no need for trivial things like words between them. Sunny did not even have to use Shadow Dance to understand his loyal demon's combat will perfectly. She was his Shadow, after all, and also one of the masters from whom he had learned the most.

Fighting back to back with Saint… ah, he had missed that feeling. She had been forced to act independently by the circumstances as of late, so they rarely received opportunities to enter battle together.

'Let's kill these wretches fast and go help Nightmare…'

Brandishing the Cruel Sight and the Sin of Solace, the two of them faced the towering Corrupted.

They wasted no time to attack.

Chapter-920: Sum of Its Parts

It had not been too hard to cut down the two Corrupted abominations.

Well… of course, it was. Both were terrifyingly powerful and vicious. A single creature like that could have decimated a whole brigade of mundane soldiers and erased an entire human citadel from the map. The smallest touch of their hands was enough to obliterate the soul of a powerful Awakened.

But Sunny and Saint were stronger.

Not in the literal sense, since both were lacking in terms of physical strength when compared to the Voiceless. However, their skill, synergy, and murderous resolve were unrivaled. Luring the abominations into a trap after trap and helping each other avoid the retaliatory strikes, they swiftly cut the looming creatures down.

The fact that one of the creatures was missing an arm and losing rivers of blood helped, too.

In a sense, it was similar to facing Carapace Centurions back on the Forgotten Shore. Those monsters had been higher than Sunny in both Class and Rank, and yet he had killed his fair share. These ones… even though Corrupted Nightmare Creatures were much more powerful, he was not a Sleeper anymore, either. Sunny's own power had grown immensely in the past years.

In fact, he could have dealt with the two voiceless abominations even faster, but his mind was also preoccupied by manifesting shadows to help Nightmare hold on. With a swarm of black tentacles supporting him, the dark courser managed to last until Sunny and Saint were done with their prey.

The rest was simple, if not at all easy.

Facing dozens of Fallen abominations was a daunting task, as well. It took all Sunny had to obliterate them while keeping his Shadows alive. The battle was arduous, brutal, and bloody. His body was full of holes by the end of it, and his mind was on the verge of collapse due to exhaustion.

However, the three of them were a harrowing threat to oppose. Without the Corrupted leading them, the rest of the Voiceless had no choice but to succumb to the aura of fear emanating from Nightmare, Saint's merciless blade, and his shadows.

The Sin of Solace severed their bodies, Nightmare's hooves and fangs tore them apart, the Cruel Sight burned them down, and the swarm of manifested shadows restrained and blocked them to make the killing easier.

By the end, the narrow ravine was all but buried in corpses.

The last one to die was the Corrupted whose mind Saint had destroyed before Sunny arrived. Feeling a sense of dreadful threat from the tall abomination, Sunny chose not to approach it and summoned Morgan's Warbow once again, instead.

The creature turned out to be incredibly resilient. He had to sink dozens of arrows into its flesh to kill it. The Corrupted eventually fell to its knees, burdened by the weight of them… but even then, it did not die for a while.

The black threads piercing its lips did not give until the very end, no matter how much the abominable creature clawed at them with its immense strength. Through all of it, the emotionless expression on the gaunt face of the Corrupted had disturbingly not changed once.

But eventually, its hands fell down, and it grew still, still kneeling.

Only then did the Spell speak:

[You have slain a Corrupted Devil, Defiled Herald.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Letting out a heavy sigh, Sunny lowered his aching arms and sunk to

the ground, utterly spent.

At long last, the battle was over.

He had survived, and the convoy had, too. He could see the transports through the shadow that had stayed back. They were safe and sound.

Numb, Sunny stared at the ghostly flames of the aurora burning in the black skies above.

His mind was empty.

'...Who could have thought?'

***

On the shore of the lake that had turned into a scene of slaughter, Luster was sitting on a shard of a boulder, breathing heavily. In front of him, countless corpses were floating in the black water, and a mess of severed bodies and limbs littered the icy shallows. The smell of it all was truly revolting.

'Ah, what a disgusting sight.'

He was alive, at least. So were the rest of the Irregulars. After Captain had somehow obliterated half of the swarm with a single arrow — and acted as though that was a perfectly normal thing to do, in his usual manner — they had fought the remaining Nightmare Creatures and prevailed.

'Are all Masters insane?'

No, that shouldn't be the case. Captain had to be extra insane. If everyone was that bizarre, humanity would have collapsed a long time ago.

…The Captain was alive, as well. Luster had no idea how he was dealing with the second swarm, which was out there somewhere, close by, but the simple fact that Kimmy was still able to channel his dark vision to the Irregulars meant that their leader had not died… yet.

'Someone that evil probably can't even die. I bet he's immortal.'

And yet, Luster found himself a little worried.

For his own skin, of course! If Captain died, how would Luster himself survive? And if Luster died… how sad would all the beauties in the world be?

'What a tragedy. For their sake, I must live on… yeah… robbing beautiful women of my company would be too cruel…'

Like Samara. Or Miss Beth. Or that pretty soldier he had gotten to know in the bunker. Or those refugee sisters in the third civilian transport… the list went on!

'Not Kimmy, though. Well, she can't help it, poor thing. Being unattractive must be her Flaw… so sad.'

And yet, the thought of dying on Kimmy made him especially upset, for some reason.

'Who else would spare her the time of day if I die?'

Therefore, Luster had to live.

At that moment, he saw a familiar silhouette appear from the darkness.

Flinching, Luster hurriedly stood up and took a step forward.

"Captain, sir! You're back! Ah… I am so glad…"

However, something about the silhouette was wrong.

The armor seemed about right… but since when was Captain so tall? And… feminine?

…And cool?

Luster stared at the approaching silhouette for a few moments, dumbfounded.

"What the…"

Then, another figure emerged from the shadows, wearing a very similar suit of fearsome black armor. That was the Captain.

Staggering back, Luster tripped and fell on his butt. His eyes widened in horror.

"...Gods! There's two of them!"

Chapter-921: New Pets

Sunny stared at Luster for a few moments, then sighed.

'What is wrong with that guy?'

The young man seemed unsure where to look. His startled gaze jumped between Sunny and Saint, full of confusion. Then, strange sparks ignited in his eyes.

"Ah, I see! So that is…"

Sunny did not let him finish.

"You are alive. Good. I take it that the swarm is dealt with…"

By that time, the other members of the cohort approached, as well, so it seemed that all of them had survived. They looked relatively unscathed, too… which couldn't be said about Sunny and Saint.

Both were in a rough shape, the taciturn demon worse off than he was. Nightmare was severely wounded, too, so Sunny had dismissed him. Now, the black steed was being nurtured back to health in the dark flames of Sunny's soul.

He could not let Saint go, though… not yet. He needed her strength to keep the convoy safe. If a Shadow sustained serious damage, it would enter a slumber once dismissed. That slumber would last until the damage was sufficiently repaired, which meant that Sunny would not be able to summon the sleeping Shadow for some time.

Since Saint's wounds, while plentiful, were not life-threatening, he hoped to find a different solution — one that would keep her by his side in the coming days.

…Luster was not the only one who stared at the graceful knight with

curiosity. The other Irregulars seemed to have a lot of questions, as well. Some of them had known that their captain possessed a hidden ace, but none of them had seen her before.

Surprisingly, usually quiet Kim was the first one to ask:

"Captain, sir! Uh… who is that? Oh, sorry, ma'am… it is nice to meet you?"

Saint remained silent and indifferent, like always. Her aloofness seemed to give Kim pause. The timid girl looked at the demon awkwardly...

Sunny tilted his head a little and glanced at her with confusion.

'...Ma'am? What's up with that tone? And why do I feel that she's being more respectful to Saint than to me?'

Frowning slightly, he said:

"This is Saint. She is… an Echo, of sorts."

Luster's eyes turned into circles.

"Wha… A Saint?! Captain… you have a Saint as an Echo?"

Sunny grimaced as an especially strong pulse of pain rolled through his body, stifled a groan, and shook his head.

'What kind of idiot would believe something like that? Gods…'

"No… she is merely an Ascended Demon. She's just called Saint. In any case, Saint has been warding off a lot of threats before they had reached the convoy, but now, she'll be traveling with us for a bit. So… get used to it."

The Irregulars did not mind. His use of the word merely had not been entirely appropriate... an Ascended Demon was an Ascended Demon. Facing one would give most Masters a lot of trouble. Having such a powerful creature fighting on their side was an incredible boon, as far as the members of the cohort were concerned…

At that moment, Quentin suddenly spoke, his usually gallant voice sounding a bit haggard:

"Oh… I need to report something, Captain. We received a few Memories after wiping out the swarm, as usual. But, this time, there was something else."

He looked at Samara, and then, a whirlwind of sparks appeared around them.

Sunny blinked.

'Is that what I think it is…'

Soon, two shapes appeared from the storm of sparks. Both were monstrous in appearance, resembling nightmarish hounds. One was about the size of a large wolf, while the other was larger than a PTV. Black tongues hung from their ferocious maws, dripping with venom.

Quentin smiled brightly and patted the smaller monstrosity on the head.

"...We also received two Echoes. This one is Blackie, an Awakened Beast. The other one is an Ascended Monster, and… oh… I am actually not sure what Sam called it."

He glanced at the giant abomination, and then looked at Samara questioningly.

Her face remained as deadpan as ever. She remained silent for a few moments, and then said laconically:

"...Abomination."

Quentin cleared his throat.

"And the other one is called Abomination. We were bound to get an Echo sooner or later, of course, but two at the same time… isn't this great news, Captain?"

Sunny tried very hard to appear calm. His expression was perfectly composed.

'Are you… goddamn… kidding me?!'

What the hell? How could they get two whole Echoes, while he had not received even one after Nightmare, despite slaughtering literal thousands of enemies?!

What rotten luck was that?!

Suddenly, the Transcendent Memory he had received and could not wait to study did not seem as that much of a jackpot anymore.

A shaky smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"Yeah… great news, indeed."

He glanced at the two monstrous hounds — one small, the other one large — and swallowed his bitter envy. Then, Sunny turned to Quentin and said:

"In any case, I want you to see if you can use your Ability to heal… uh, repair… treat Saint. I don't know if it will work, but… do your best. We'll need her strength soon."

***

Sunny had a good reason to believe that Quentin's healing Aspect would be effective in helping Saint, at least to some degree.

The graceful knight was a strange creature. Her body was different from that of a human, or most Nightmare Creatures for that matter. It was not exactly made of flesh, but it was also not really stone. Instead, it was something in between, having characteristics of both.

Applications of modern medicine would obviously not work, since even the greatest surgeon would be utterly lost at what to do with Saint's mysterious anatomy. Healing Aspects might not be of any use, either, since most of them were aimed at mending flesh.

However, Quentin was a bit special in that regard.

His Ability was not actually to heal, but instead to restore. It was slower and less effective than more straightforward healing powers,

but also more universal. Sunny had seen Quentin treat people, repair machine parts, and even mend cracks in the hull of a ship. In battle, he used that Ability to keep his armor from breaking apart no matter how much damage it sustained.

So… since the chivalrous healer could restore both living beings and inanimate objects, was there anyone better suited to treat Saint, who seemed to be a bit of both?

That was what Sunny was thinking about as they walked through the snow, returning back to the convoy.

Luckily, his guess turned out to be correct. Although slowly, Saint's broken armor started to mend under Quentin's touch, and the flow of fine ruby dust that served her as blood was stemmed.

For now, she would still be able to help him defend the refugees.

…But how many battles like the one they had won today were there ahead?

How many would it take to kill them all?

Chapter-922: Little by Little

Back in the Rhino, Saint remained in the cargo hold, standing near the engineering workstation while Quentin continued the slow process of mending her armor and stonelike flesh. If people did not know better, they would have thought that she was an actual statue.

Since the healer was busy with the Captain's Echo, the rest of the Irregulars found themselves robbed of his care. Although no one sustained serious wounds… except for Sunny… there were still a few scrapes that had to be tended to.

Unexpectedly, Beth volunteered to administer first aid. As it turned out, she had some medical knowledge. The members of the cohort did not care too much about who treated their wounds, really… well, except for Luster.

The fool seemed very excited, for some reason.

Sunny himself had long ago dismissed his battered armor and was sitting in the lounge area, looking at his black bodysuit with some regret. The uniform was truly the result of a magnificent design. Among other features, it was even able to repair itself… however, everything had its limits.

With how much abuse he had put it through, the bodysuit was definitely a goner. It was full of holes, looking like a set of rags. His body beneath hurt all over, too.

'Well. Figures…'

At least there was good news, as well.

The convoy was already moving forward. After reaching the valley, the mundane soldiers and the civilians had been shocked to see the scene of slaughter there… they were even more disturbed after

witnessing the narrow ravine where Sunny, Saint, and Nightmare had fought the Voiceless.

In fact, even the members of the cohort seemed a bit pale.

Regardless, the battle had gone surprisingly well for the convoy. Not only had they survived without suffering any losses, but the Irregulars even managed to acquire two Echoes. The monstrous hounds were going to be of great help in their long journey.

Sunny's list of assets was slowly growing.

He had made use of the Echoes right there and then, commanding his soldiers to send them to recover soul shards from the corpses of the Fallen and Corrupted abominations of the Voiceless swarm. Fishing out the Black Tongues from the water was too much trouble, so he had just left them there.

Soon, the lake would freeze again, encasing the mangled corpses of the Nightmare Creatures in ice. That would probably be a macabre sight.

Sunny had kept the souls shards of the Corrupted to himself while sending the rest to the lone Sleeper… whatever his name was. Just like that, the lucky bastard got even closer to fully saturating his core, without ever lifting a finger.

At least he was getting stronger. Sunny needed all the strength he could get.

Still, he was a bit infuriated by how easily his subordinates were getting the good stuff. Was there no justice in the world?

…At least there were the Memories he had received.

Before Sunny could summon the runes, however, Beth approached him, carrying one of the unreasonably expensive medkits he had outfitted the Rhino with. He looked at her in confusion.

"What?"

The young woman frowned.

"What do you mean, what? I'm here to treat you. Come on, get out of that raggedy uniform. I don't have all day, you know."

Sunny stared at her for a bit.

"...No need."

Beth let out a heavy sigh.

"Let's not do that whole bravado thing, okay? Even if you are a Master, you are still going to bleed to death if I don't administer the clotting agent, with all these wounds. I need to clean them, too… unless you want to risk going into septic shock, of course. In that case, be my guest. Stay where you are."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then shook his head.

"I don't bleed."

The young woman blinked a couple of times.

"Huh?"

He waved his hand and pointed to his body. Indeed, although there were plenty of holes in the bodysuit, there was very little blood.

"Bleeding is too pedestrian. So, I don't bleed."

Beth stared at him, lost for words.

He shrugged.

"If that's all, go away. I'm busy."

She gritted her teeth and glowered at him.

"Oh, yeah? What are you so busy with?"

Sunny silently studied his bodysuit for a few moments and then answered in a somber tone.

"...Being miserable."

Beth flung her arms up, turned around, and walked away.

'Finally…'

Left alone, Sunny summoned the runes, looking up his shadow fragments first:

Shadow Fragments: [1601/4000].

His progress had slowed after being dispatched to LO49, but now, its speed was picking up again. Still, he had a long way to go.

Next, Sunny checked on Saint and Nightmare.

Shadow Fragments: [146/200].

Nightmares required: [333/1000].

Once he fed the Memories received from the Black Tongues to the taciturn demon, she would finally cross the one hundred and fifty fragments mark.

'Three fourths there…'

If Saint became Transcendent, his power was bound to increase drastically. However, progress on that front was torturously slow. With how many soul shards he now had access to, Sunny could have tried to create a few Memories himself. But weaving Memories required a lot of time, and even more essence — and while the former was scarce, it was the latter that was truly precious.

Essence was the most valuable thing in Antarctica. There was never enough of it, and since Sunny did not know when the next battle would come, he could not allow himself to waste it on weaving ethereal strings.

Making Saint a Transcendent in the future was not going to help him if he died today, starved for essence and unable to fight well.

…On the other hand, his steed was collecting nightmares with a surprising speed. It was probably because the dark destrier was harvesting the seeds that he had planted into the souls of

abominations during the last two months.

That was good, too… Sunny could not wait to learn what Nightmare's Terror Ability was like.

Lastly, he studied the runes describing the Mantle of the Underworld:

Vanquished Foes: [5732/6000].

'...So close.'

If things did not go well, he would probably fill the counter of the [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment before arriving to Erebus Field, or very soon after.

'Good… I mean, bad… I mean, good? I do hope that we won't have to fight battles like the last one often on the way to safety, but if we do… at least I'll get something from it.'

The problem was that the Mantle was currently damaged, and needed some time to restore itself. He could have summoned it and activated the [Living Stone] enchantment, but, once again… that would consume a lot of essence, and Sunny was already dangerously short on it after slaughtering two entire swarms of abominations.

'Let's see the main prize, then…'

He inhaled deeply, and then looked at the list of his Memories.

Among them, two new ones especially attracted his attention.

One was called [Bitter Cusp].

The other was called [Stifled Scream].

Chapter-923: Secret of the Estuary

Sunny shifted a little, trying to find a position that caused him the least pain. His wounds were already healing, so, to add insult to injury, he also felt itchy all over. Masters were vastly more resilient than mundane humans, and their bodies could naturally recover from being severely damaged — and that was without even counting the tenacious potency of the Blood Weave.

…However, the process was still not pleasant.

Trying to ignore the discomfort, Sunny decided to take a look at the [Bitter Cusp] first. It was one of the Memories he had received after decimating the swarm of Black Tongues, and while all the rest would be best used to feed Saint, he felt like holding on to that one.

The reason was very simple — unlike the other Memories, [Bitter Cusp] was of the Ascended Rank.

Concentrating on the runes, Sunny read:

Memory: [Bitter Cusp].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Tool.

'A tool, huh…'

What kind of tool would the monstrous beasts have left behind? Sunny knew not to underestimate the value of utility, but still, he couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. The usefulness of this type

of Memories was often situational. The [Autumn Leaf] he had used to change the color of his hair was also a tool…

'Hopefully, this thing will be more practical.'

He continued to study the runes.

Memory Description: [They entered the beautiful halls of the Jade Court harboring venomous desires in their black hearts, and hiding rapacious snarls behind their admiring smiles. The mistress of the palace herself presented them with a cup of the sweetest nectar. No matter how much of the sweet nectar they drank, the cup remained full. The more of it they consumed, the more of it they desired.

Soon, there was nothing but bestial need left, and nothing but bitterness remained.]

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

'Well… that's one weird description. I do wonder if the Jade Court has something to do with that beetle I fought, though...'

He turned his attention to the enchantments. There was only one.

Enchantment: [Black Venom].

Enchantment Description: [This cup overflows with a bitter venom. Do not drink it.]

'...Huh?'

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then summoned the Bitter Cusp. Soon, a beautifully engraved chalice of white jade appeared in his hand. Indeed, it was full of a perfectly black liquid.

'Yeah… not drinking that… definitely…'

For some reason, Sunny had a strange compulsion to take a sip. Maybe it was because the Spell had straightforwardly instructed him not to... however, his intuition was telling him that the black liquid was, indeed, a deadly poison. And if it felt deadly to him, then it had to be rather potent.

Politely asking an enemy to have a drink did not seem like a good idea, which was not to say that there was no use for the Ascended toxin. Smearing the Black Venom on a blade was one of them, for example.

It would also not be a problem to stealthily add a drop or two into someone's food or drink… not that he would do such a thing, of course…

Satisfied, Sunny dismissed the Bitter Cusp and concentrated on the second Memory that had caught his attention. He had high hopes for this one, considering that it came from a Corrupted Demon, Voiceless Prelate.

The runes read:

Memory: [Stifled Scream].

Memory Rank: Transcendent.

Memory Tier: III.

Memory Type: Charm.

'Jackpot.'

Charms were rare and extremely useful, and it was especially so for Sunny, considering that both Saint and the Mantle of the Underworld had the ability to fuse one into themselves.

He already had one Transcendent Charm, but a second one was most welcome.

He continued to study the runes.

Memory Description: [...a great river was contained within it, flowing endlessly from the future into the past. When doom came, many entered to seek shelter from it, and many had come to seek the truth. That was because the Great River existed outside time, and so, it was said that a dreadful secret was hidden at its estuary.

Few of those capable dared to approach it, and none of those who

had returned.]

'...Mysterious.'

That description really had not told Sunny much. Perplexed, he remained motionless for a few moments, then shook his head and continued to read the runes.

Enchantments: [Echoing Silence], [Word of Power].

[Echoing Silence] Enchantment Description: "When wearing this charm, the physical power of its master is augmented… but only as long as they remain silent. The longer their silence lasts, uninterrupted, the greater the boon of power they'll receive."

Sunny tilted his head.

'Interesting…'

So it was a comprehensive physical boost. It started off modest, but would slowly grow for as long as the person wearing the charm did not speak… or used their voice in any kind of way, be it to scream, laugh, or groan. The stretch of silence also had to be uninterrupted, meaning that the augmentation would be reset both if the condition was broken or if the charm was dismissed.

Of course, there was a ceiling to this augmentation, but considering the Transcendent Rank of the Stifled Scream, that ceiling had to be a rather high one.

That did not seem too useful for Sunny, at the moment, since he constantly had to talk to people and give orders. However, it was simply perfect for Saint, who was either incapable of speaking or chose not to.

Even after all this time, Sunny still did not know whether it was the former or the latter.

Thoughtful, he glanced at the second enchantment.

[Word of Power] Enchantment Description: "A word spoken by the master of this charm is a command. If born of great silence, the word

of power can hardly be ignored. If not, it has no worth."

That one was different. The enchantment was extremely powerful, since there were few limitations attached to it. Commanding the enemies to kneel or turn on each other… Sunny could imagine many great uses for such an ability. However, its compelling power also depended on how long the wearer had remained silent before uttering the command.

Ironically, this enchantment was extremely useful to Sunny, but utterly useless to Saint.

'...What a complicated Memory.'

With a sigh, he dismissed the runes, and then stood up.

Walking to the communication suite of the Rhino, he then hailed Sergeant Gere on the radio. A few seconds later, Sunny heard a response.

"Yes, Captain?"

Sunny summoned the Bitter Cusp, placed it on the surface of the terminal, and stared at it with a pondering look.

He had a great idea on how to use it.

"...Ah, yes, Sergeant Gere. Listen. When we reach our next stop, I'll give you a very pretty cup. Be sure to have all our ammunition be treated with the black liquid from that cup."

A tiny bit of an Ascended poison smeared across the blade of the Sin of Solace or the Cruel Sight would have very little effect on his performance in battle, considering that the only Nightmare Creatures that gave him enough trouble to require additional solutions would be all but immune to a negligent dose of the Black Venom.

The only abominations such a small dose would kill were of the lower Ranks, and he could already dispatch those easily.

…That was not the case for the mundane soldiers, however. To them, even Dormant Nightmare Creatures were a great challenge, not to

mention the Awakened ones.

The Bitter Cusp could potentially change that situation entirely.

Grinning ominously, Sunny lingered for a bit, and then added:

"Oh, but make sure to not touch the liquid. If even a single drop gets on your skin, you'll die. In gruesome, terrible agony. So… wear gloves, I guess. Better yet, use a long stick…"

Chapter-924: Wear and Tear

The convoy moved forward in the darkness. Climbing the slopes of icy mountains and navigating the complicated network of old, forgotten concrete roads, they traveled north in a desperate hope to survive the calamity of the Chain of Nightmares.

A day after the battle on the frozen lake, the convoy reached a derelict meteorological station and made camp. Military vehicles were arranged in a circle, with turrets facing out. Food was cooked and distributed to the refugees, and tired people settled in the half-collapsed buildings to sleep and rest.

Sunny used that time to make his plans of coating the bullets of mundane soldiers with poison come to fruition. The process had turned out to be harder than expected, but they managed to find a solution in the end. The task of handling the Bitter Cusp was entrusted to the convoy's lone Sleeper, whose green snakeskin armor imbued the young man with a high enough resistance to toxins.

…The old woman who had been going through her own First Nightmare quietly passed away during that night. The fact that her body did not turn into a frenzied abomination proved that she had passed the trial of the Spell. However, it seemed that her weary soul was unable to form a stable core, and so, it collapsed, turning the woman Hollow.

Sunny took the dark responsibility of disposing of the body upon himself. In the morning, they held a somber funeral under the eerie lights of the aurora, and then dove back into the bitter cold of the twisting roads.

The small column of vehicles continued to struggle against the rough terrain and the dreadful conditions of the polar night as it slowly ventured deeper into the mountains. In the next few days, they had to fight against several more packs of prowling Nightmare Creatures,

but none of them were as large and threatening as the two swarms the Irregulars had eradicated before.

The battle readiness of the convoy had increased due to Sunny's efforts and a bit of luck. The two new Echoes served as forward scouts and provided invaluable support in combat. The Ascended one, Abomination, was especially fearsome. The Sleeper Belle was mentoring was growing into his power, too, and his core was well on its way to being fully saturated.

The mundane soldiers were now capable of dealing with weaker Nightmare Creatures thanks to the Bitter Cusp. Saint was slowly growing stronger as her wounds healed and the [Echoing Silence] enchantment of the Stifled Scream continued to accumulate power, little by little.

To the people of the convoy, things appeared to be looking up.

…However, Sunny knew that it was just an illusion.

In truth, their situation was becoming more dire with each day.

The further north they moved, the more Nightmare Creatures there were. Navigating between powerful swarms of them was getting harder and harder, and so was avoiding the truly overwhelming hordes. The amount of small skirmishes the Irregulars and their Echoes had to fight was growing in both frequency and ferocity.

For now, they were handling the pressure fine, but their fatigue continued to mount, while their physical condition deteriorated.

Small scrapes and injuries they received were bound to add up, sooner or later. Their reserves of essence were also getting closer and closer to not having enough time to replenish between fights, even with Luster's help.

Additionally, the deeper they went into the mountains, the more signs of destruction caused by the earthquake they encountered. Many roads were completely destroyed by rockfalls or buried under countless tons of glacial ice. Increasingly often, the Rhino could not handle clearing the path through the roads that remained.

All of that meant that there were more and more enemies around, with fewer and fewer suitable paths to take. Sunny felt like a noose was being drawn tighter around his neck with each day.

As a result, he had to lead the convoy forward using more risky routes. A few times, the civilian transports were very close to falling off the crumbling roads and plummeting into the deep gorges below, or being destroyed by falling debris. He had to leave the Rhino and use shadow chains to secure the vehicles, shield them, or pull them to safety with his own two hands.

He even had to resort to coming close to the abandoned tunnels that pierced the mountains here and there, promising convenient shortcuts and shelter from the chilling wind. However, just looking at the dark portals of their hungrily open maws made Sunny shiver. Driving past the old tunnels filled him with a sense of deep, gnawing unease.

'No goddamn way...'

The condition of the transports was also getting worse and worse. The rougher of a path he chose, the faster they broke down. Samara and Kim had to administer hasty field repairs more than a few times, but there was only so much they could do.

The engines of the vehicles stalled. Their wheels got stuck in the deep snow. The heating elements malfunctioned and filled the interiors with acrid smoke. The batteries cracked and leaked because of being both overheated and exposed to terrible cold.

There was no end to the problems Sunny had to solve.

'Damnation…'

Sitting in front of a screen in the command suite of the Rhino, he stared at the map. Sunny had just finished updating it with the information his shadows had brought back from a lengthy scouting mission.

Many lines had been crossed out, and many red marks shifted position, drawing a narrow net around the convoy.

In the absence of the black bodysuit, he was back to wearing the Puppeteer's Shroud outside of combat. His old and reliable armor possessed an enchantment called [Doubtless], but ironically, he was full of doubts.

'Just how am I supposed to…'

At that moment, one of the transports behind the Rhino came to a screeching halt. The lights illuminating its interior went out, signaling a serious malfunction. The rest of the vehicles were forced to stop, too.

Sunny looked down and sighed.

'...What now?'

Standing up, he stretched, massaged his tired shoulders, and left the APC through the main hatch.

Darkness and bitter cold welcomed him, and the cutting wind immediately tried to suck all warmth out of his body. Walking through the light snowfall, Sunny headed to the back of the convoy. Saint's silent figure gazed at him from the roof of the Rhino, where she stood with a bow in her hands.

Looking up, Sunny found that the stars to the east appeared a bit hazy, as if veiled by something. A resentful frown appeared on his face.

'Don't tell me… is the blizzard picking up again?'

This was grave news.

Chapter-925: Low Growl

Walking toward the broken transport, Sunny was deep in thought. If the blizzard was really returning… things were going to get ugly for the convoy.

Sure, the snowstorm would hide their location from the roaming swarms of Nightmare Creatures, but it would also all but destroy his own ability to track the abominations and keep his map up to date. Sunny and his shadows could see through the darkness of the polar night, but they could not see through the impenetrable wall of billowing snow.

Additionally, the mundane drivers were going to have even more trouble with keeping their vehicles on the road. The vehicles themselves would suffer more stress, as well…

Should he insist on continuing to drive through the blizzard, or find a place for the convoy to wait it out? Sunny did not like the thought of traveling across treacherous old roads in such hazardous conditions, but neither did he like the idea of being stationary, holed up in some cave like a blind rat, with no way to escape should things go south.

'Damned blizzard… damned rustbuckets… why can't they all be like the Rhino?'

Of course, that was not a fair comparison to make. His Rhino was a state-of-the-art military carrier, while the civilian transports were just that — some of them could barely be used to carry people, even, since they had been hastily refitted from industrial cargo vehicles in preparation for the evacuation campaign.

It was a miracle that they were able to move, honestly.

Approaching the cause of the current setback, Sunny had to walk around the massive body of Abomination, who was laying on the

road and staring east. The massive beast seemed to have sensed the approaching blizzard, as well, considering how intently it was looking at the sky. Snowflakes were falling on its rugged fur.

The smaller Echo… Blackie, or whatever the Awakened Beast was called… was there as well, leaning against the larger one. It had a habit of following the stronger monster everywhere, while Abomination mostly ignored its existence.

'Damned mongrels… would it kill you to make way for me? I am the master of your masters, you know! Show some respect…'

Shaking his head, Sunny reached the transport. Samara, Kim, and Quentin were already there, running diagnostics with grim expressions on their faces.

He did not like the look of that.

"What's the situation?"

Samara glanced at him with a deep frown.

"Captain. It is serious this time… there was a charge overload in the hub relay, causing the main battery to be cut off from the rest of the systems. Usually, that wouldn't be too debilitating, but this transport already lost both the support battery and the backup accumulator. There's… a lot of melted wiring. Quentin can restore some, but other parts will need to be replaced."

Sunny did not understand much of what she had said, but then again, he didn't need to. That was the whole reason for employing specialists.

He had become a big fan of delegation.

"So… how long is it going to take to get this transport moving again?"

Samara looked at Kim and Quentin, then hesitated for a bit.

"About two hours, if we move fast."

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

Two hours… that was not impossible, although cutting it close. Their window of opportunity to drive past the nearest horde allowed for such a delay, but not much more. If he let the convoy stall for two hours, there would be no space for mistakes in the next day or so.

Could he afford that? Or should he abandon the transport and relocate people to the remaining ones, thus overloading the struggling vehicles even further and increasing the risk that they themselves might break down in turn?

'Curse it. Did Nephis have to deal with this amount of nonsense during her short stint as the Bright Lord?'

Leading half a thousand crazed Sleepers through a bloody revolt and a suicidal crusade might have been a bit harder than he had thought.

'Being in charge of hundreds of people was not at all fun...'

Sunny was slowly starting to understand why the Sovereigns were all suffering from some sort of lunacy.

He sighed.

"I can give you one hundred and ten minutes. If it's not done until then, though, we'll load the refugees on other transports and abandon this one. For now, do what you can. Gere will make sure that the passengers aren't cold."

With nothing much to do after that, Sunny walked aside and stood in the shadows as his subordinates got busy with their tasks. He thought about returning to the warm interior of the Rhino, but decided against it. He had been cooped up inside it for a while, so some fresh air — even if it was bitterly cold — was a welcomed change.

The refugees inside the dead transport did not seem too discouraged, especially after soldiers brought a portable heater. The Sleeper was there too. His lantern Memory chased away the darkness, helping the civilians cope with their fear.

And speaking of the Sleeper…

'Currently, we don't have any more infected. Which means that the

infirmary transport is empty… if things don't go well with the repairs, I can just reassign the passengers there. That can be a good stopgap solution. There'll be trouble when someone does catch the Spell, of course…'

His thoughts were interrupted by Abomination, who suddenly let out a low growl. Considering the size of the massive monster, its growls reverberated through one's very bones, and were not easy to ignore.

Sunny turned and looked at the Echo with a frown.

'What's up with him… her… whatever. What's up with that thing?'

Abomination's monstrous snout was gnashed, revealing rows of terrifying fangs. It was still laying on the road, staring at the eastern skies. The Echo looked… tense.

The other beast by its side was also acting nervous. However, it seemed to be simply repeating after the larger one without understanding the reason. Sunny's frown deepened, turning into a scowl.

'...That can't be good.'

He walked over to Abomination and tried to climb on it to get a good vantage point.

"Don't move, you bastard!"

Reaching the creature's withers, he looked east, seeing the same thing that it saw.

The veil of the blizzard had grown closer, and a large part of the horizon — what little of it could be seen between the towering mountain peaks — was now obscured by it. Sunny did not notice anything else, though.

'Does it not like snow?'

Then again, that blizzard was not of natural origin. It was caused by a titan called Winter Beast. From what Sunny knew, the titan was currently being suppressed by Saint Tyris somewhere far to the

north… that was why the snowstorm came and went, hinting at who was prevailing in the clash at the moment.

Sky Tide's Aspect also had to do with controling winds and storms, so while it did not directly counter the titan's powers, she could at least challenge its authority.

In any case, Winter Beast could not be anywhere near the convoy.

Then why…

Suddenly, Sunny's eyes narrowed.

Looking closer at the distant haze obscuring the cold dark sky, he suddenly had a very disturbing idea.

…Was it really the blizzard?

Chapter-926: Stormfront

Sunny stared at the distant haze for a few moments, then glanced at Kim, who was busy with repairs. The [Evil Eye] Memory he had given her was supposed to make one capable of seeing things at a greater distance… however, there was an easier way.

He called out to Sergeant Gere, who happened to be hurrying past at that exact moment.

"Hey, Sergeant."

The man stopped and looked at the Captain… who was standing on top of the terrifying monster the Irregulars had recently received from the Nightmare Spell, for some reason. Already accustomed to their leader's eccentric behavior, the soldier did not even bother to try and guess the reason.

"Yes, Captain?"

Sunny lingered for a moment.

"Do you have… what are they called… binoculars?"

Gere nodded.

"Of course, sir. We have several pairs, one per vehicle. Standard military issue."

Sunny gave him a tense look, then said quietly:

"Go bring me the best ones."

Slightly disturbed by that tone, Gere glanced at the bundle of blankets he was carrying, then dropped them into the snow and dashed toward the tail of the convoy. Very soon, he returned with a pair of modern binoculars and, not daring to approach the monster,

threw them to the Captain.

Sunny caught them, brought the unfamiliar device to his eyes, and looked east. At first, the image was blurry and unclear, but then, something hummed softly, and it came into focus on its own.

Suddenly, it felt as though he was standing much, much closer to the slope of a distant mountain. Sunny could even see the individual boulders, as well as mounds of snow between them. Moving the binoculars, he searched for a stretch of open sky.

A few seconds later, he finally laid his eyes on the haze that obscured it.

Sunny remained motionless for around a minute after that, then silently lowered his hands. His face remained still, but his eyes were suddenly terribly bleak.

Feeling something, Sergeant Gere cleared his throat.

"Sir? What is it?"

The Captain looked at him with those bleak eyes, making the soldier shiver.

'What is it…'

Sunny repeated the question in his mind.

What he had seen was… was not a wall of swirling snow.

Instead, it was a ghastly creature that resembled a mix between a bat and a leech, with leathery wings, a long neck, and a head that seemed to be one giant, fleshy, circular maw.

In fact, he saw thousands, and thousands, and thousands of them.

The hazy veil that obscured the sky was not caused by the returning blizzard. It was a horde of flying abominations that was so vast that it resembled a rolling stormfront from a distance.

That vast horde of horrid abominations was swiftly moving in their

direction.

Suddenly, Sunny's mouth was terribly dry. He glanced at the convoy that stretched along the narrow road, a few vehicles blocked from moving any further by the broken transport.

"...Sir?"

Sergeant Gere's tense voice caught his attention. Sunny forced himself to focus on it, pulling his mind back to reality.

'Dead, dead… they are all dead…'

Throwing the binoculars back to Gere, he threw all unnecessary thoughts out of his mind and issued an order:

"Get these people out and load them into the infirmary transport. Do it as fast as possible… no, faster than that."

Gere blinked.

"The infirmary transport? But…"

Interrupting him, Sunny barked:

"Now!"

The soldier flinched. This was the first time he heard the usually cool-headed Captain shout…

Understanding that something had gone terribly wrong, Gere ran toward the broken transport.

***

"...Move, move, move!"

A few minutes later, the frightened refugees were being hastily loaded into the infirmary vehicle. The soldiers were running around, preparing for a swift departure. The Irregulars were getting ready for a fight.

Sunny was in the middle of all this havoc, giving orders.

"Load the poisoned ammunition immediately, all of it. Empty the reserves entirely. Throw all non-essential cargo out, we need as much speed as we can get. Samara! You have three minutes to charge as many bullets as you can. Luster...

prepare the Rhino for an all-out charge…"

'We are never going to make it… there's no chance… simply none…'

The enormous horde of flying horrors was traveling too fast. The convoy would never be able to outrun it, even if they were moving on a flat and well-maintained road. Of course, fighting it was not an option, either. If the appalling creatures descended upon the convoy, everyone would be devoured within seconds. Sunny might be able to survive by turning into a shadow, but the rest…

Everyone would die a gruesome death.

And yet…

The horde seemed to be traveling from east to west, while the convoy was heading north. If, by some miracle, they managed to escape from the path of the abominations… maybe, there still was a sliver of hope for them.

Perhaps there even was some shelter ahead, one that Sunny had missed when he was compiling the map.

In any case, he couldn't bring himself to just give up. No matter how small the possibility, he owed it to these people to make an effort to save them. He had taken them under his command, after all.

They were his responsibility.

"Move!"

Finally, the broken transport was cleared of civilians. Sergeant Gere ran up to Sunny.

"It's done! Captain, what do you want to do with…"

Before he could finish the sentence, Sunny grabbed the massive

vehicle by the front bumper, strained his muscles a little, and then tossed it over the edge of the road with his bare hands.

The transport plummeted into the deep, dark gorge with thunderous clangor. It was so heavy that the road under them quaked from the violent force of the first impact.

Sunny glanced at the stunned soldier.

"Get everyone inside and start the engines. Hurry!"

As everyone ran to their vehicles, Sunny stepped through the shadows and appeared inside the Rhino. Sparing a glance at Professor Obel and Beth, he lingered for a moment and said:

"Strap yourself in. It's going to be a bumpy ride."

They listened without asking questions.

Since most of the Irregulars were assigned to the civilian transports, the only other person there was Luster. He was already in the pilot's seat, ready to send the APC forward at Sunny's command.

Sunny did not make him wait long.

"What are you waiting for? Go!"

The Rhino shot forward, plowing through snow as it cleared the way for the other vehicles. The convoy followed as they moved across the mountain road with reckless speed…

But not enough of it.

…On the roof of the APC, Saint was effortlessly holding her balance. Standing there like a statue, she slowly turned her head east.

Then, the taciturn demon lingered for a moment, and silently raised her bow.

Chapter-927: Racing Against Time

The Rhino flew forward, somehow navigating the twists and turns of the narrow mountain road without plummeting off its crumbling edge. There was nothing but darkness ahead, with snow swirling as it melted in the powerful beams of light that shot from the roof of the heavy vehicle.

For once, Luster seemed serious and completely concentrated, his fingers wrapped around the yoke so tight that they had turned white.

The convoy did its best to keep up. The civilian transports were sandwiched between the APC and the military vehicles, shaking precariously as they rolled forward at high speed. Sergeant Gere and his soldiers were hastily loading the poisoned ammunition into the feeding mechanisms of the turrets, turning their barrels east and aiming spotlights at the sky.

The veil obscuring the horizon was getting closer and closer.

'Damn, damn, damn…'

Sunny was standing behind Luster, perceiving the world through the eyes of his shadows. They were gliding far ahead, scouting the path in search of serious obstacles and possible shelter.

Shelter… there was none to be found.

And the devouring swarm was too fast to outrun.

Suddenly, his head jerked sideways. A dozen or so meters ahead, a swift silhouette lunged at the approaching Rhino from a deep crack in the cliff's face. All Sunny had time to see was a powerful body, a glint of madness burning in a pair of frenzied eyes, and dozens of

sharp claws that shimmered as if made of metal.

Before the attacking Nightmare Creature that had laid in ambush received a chance to collide with the APC, a black arrow pierced its neck, throwing the abomination back and nailing it to the stone slope. Standing on the roof of the Rhino, Saint drew the string of Morgan's Warbow again as the pinned corpse flashed by.

Luster flinched, but kept the vehicle steady.

"...That was a close one, sir."

Sunny had nothing to answer.

They had to move with as much speed as they could muster, but advancing in such a reckless manner brought its own risks. Not being able to discover ambushes in advance was one of them.

And even then, it would most likely not be enough.

"...Go faster."

By now, everyone could tell that the approaching haze was strange and unnatural. They would not be able to see the flying horrors with their own eyes for a few more minutes, but fear was already spreading through the convoy. Sunny did not really need to tell anyone to hurry.

But staying silent was too nerve-wracking, even for him.

'Curse it…'

In his mind was the image of the map of the mountains. Studying it, Sunny was feverishly trying to find a way to escape. He already knew the optimal route to take, but had a sinking feeling that it was already too late.

He did not know the speed of the approaching horde, but judging by how fast the distant sky was being devoured by it, their chances were slim.

…Up ahead, a stray Nightmare Creature appeared on the road. Before

it could react, a massive shape lunged at it from the darkness. Abomination's powerful jaws closed on the monster's throat, and then, the Echo threw it into the abyssal darkness of the gorge with a powerful twist of its neck.

Then, the Ascended Monster dashed forward, followed by the smaller Echo. Soon, they reached a fork in the road and stopped, unsure of where to go.

…Sunny knew, however. His shadows had already explored both roads, confirming the information reflected on the map.

A few moments before the Rhino reached the fork, he leaned forward and spoke to Luster:

"Take the right path."

The right path was the only acceptable choice if they wanted to have even the tiniest hope of getting out of the path of the flying swarm. There was one problem, however…

A few hundred meters ahead, it was blocked by the bodies of a pack of prowling Nightmare Creatures.

Soon, Luster saw them, too.

"...Captain! What… what do we do?"

Sunny gripped the back of the pilot's seat and leaned forward.

"Just plow through them!"

What else could they do?

The wedge-shaped ram of the Rhino was already lowered. The abominations were Awakened, at best… tons of swiftly moving metal were bound to make short work of them, or if not, at least toss them off the road.

Luster gulped and followed the instruction, accelerating toward the fearsome Nightmare Creatures without even a hint of slowing down or trying to avoid a direct collision… not that it was possible to

maneuver around the abominations on the narrow road, anyway.

Before the creatures had time to properly react…

The Rhino shuddered as it slammed into the abominations, and its armored windshield was instantly splattered with a revolting mix of blood and mangled flesh. Without skipping a beat, Luster prevented the vehicle from lurching sideways with a small shift of the yoke and moved his gaze to the screen showing the feed from the external cameras.

Until the wipers managed to clean the armored glass, looking through it was all but impossible.

Just like that, the pack of abominations was either torn apart or thrown off the road, clearing the way for the convoy.

Except for one.

Clinging to the ram of the Rhino, a bleeding beast hoisted its massive body up, a powerful limb rising to strike a devastating blow on the windshield.

…Before it could, however, the shadows nesting between spotlights on the APC's front surged forward, forming into sharp spikes. They pierced the creature and then lost their solidity, turning into black tentacles.

A moment later, the abomination was torn apart from the inside and flung into the darkness below.

"Keep going!"

Sunny gritted his teeth and then flinched as one of the rearview cameras registered a flash of light coming from the turret of Gere's military vehicle. Turning his attention to it, he saw that the soldiers had opened fire.

They were firing at the sky.

The devouring horde was still some distance away, but the first straggler had just appeared from the cold darkness and dove down

toward the convoy. The creature was not too large, but looked even more terrifying and revolting up close.

A rain of bullets tore at its body, delivering the Bitter Cusp's toxin. It should have been enough to kill the flying abomination, but the effect of the poison was not instantaneous. Either the soldiers had reacted too slowly, or the Nightmare Creature was too fast… no matter the reason, its mangled, convulsing body kept falling, approaching the windows of one of the civilian transports.

That was before another arrow flashed through the air, slicing the abomination in half. The severed parts struck the slope and then rolled down, soon disappearing under the wheels of the speeding vehicles with a repulsive crunch.

Sunny let out a shaky breath, relieved.

…The worst was only starting, though.

Because, after that first creature was killed, the turrets did not stop firing.

Chapter-928: Devouring Cloud

[You have slain an Awakened Beast, Brood of the Devouring Cloud…]

The road sloped down, soon reaching the bottom of a deep gorge and continuing forward along its twists and turns. Not afraid of sliding into the abyss anymore, the convoy received some breathing room and accelerated even more.

However, despite that, their situation only worsened.

By now, the distant mountains had already disappeared, swallowed entirely by the veil of the approaching swarm. Only a few nearest peaks remained visible, but even they were already turning hazy.

More and more flying abominations that had traveled ahead of the horde were diving at the convoy, their fleshy circular maws opening wide to bite at the speeding transports and the soldiers operating the turrets.

At first, they came one after another. Then, a few appeared at the same time. At some point, the rumble of the firing turrets turned into one continuous, rolling cannonade.

The soldiers fought with desperate determination, relying on their spotters to find the targets in time. The murderous darkness of the polar night was cut and torn by the stark beams of powerful spotlights, and tracer bullets painted it with red streaks.

High above, the ghostly aurora glimmered among the stars, slowly turning crimson.

Sunny was cursing the world.

Tired of waiting powerlessly inside the Rhino, he climbed to its roof

through the upper hatch and swayed as a furious wind assaulted him with cutting cold. A few steps away, Saint was standing straight, sending one arrow after another into the dark sky. Each arrow reaped a life, and the bodies of abhorrent creatures were raining down on the snow behind the convoy.

In a gun nest on the roof of one of the civilian transports, Samara was discharging her rifle time after time, and somewhere high above, bloody explosions of charged essence bloomed with each shot.

The other Awakened were assisting the soldiers, as well. However, even though each possessed a Memory capable of dealing damage at range, they were less proficient with them. The Sleeper, ironically, was the closest the convoy had to a marksman after Saint and Samara. His quiver was full of poisoned arrows.

…In an infuriating turn of events, Sunny was the only one without a suitable weapon. He only had one bow, and that one was currently being used by his Shadow.

'Curses…'

The Undying Chain was already encasing his body, and the Dying Wish was calling out to the Nightmare Creatures, compelling the nearest ones to aim at him, and him alone. That made the pattern of their attacks a little bit more predictable, causing more bullets to hit their mark. He did not know what else to do...

All of it was meaningless, anyway.

The convoy could kill a thousand of these flying monstrosities, and it would still be no more than a drop in the ocean. With each minute, the number of attacking abominations was mounting, and with each second, the Devouring Cloud was drawing closer.

Soon, it would envelop the gorge completely, and then, all their efforts would end in a gruesome and bloody finale. Sunny did not think for a second that the convoy would be able to fight through countless thousands of the flying abominations.

'Why did I not account for it… fool, damned fool!'

It was not as though he had not fought swarms of flying Nightmare Creatures before. And yet, Sunny had never considered a situation like this one seriously enough to come up with effective countermeasures.

What countermeasures were there, though? What was one supposed to do if the sky itself decided to devour them?

He gritted his teeth.

There was no way out, as far as Sunny could tell. They had already failed to escape from the path of the harrowing horde, and had not found a shelter to weather the heavenly plague.

The soldiers continued to fire their turrets, hurriedly swinging the steaming barrels around to catch the Brood beasts before they crashed into the transports. Saint and Samara continued their slaughter.

But there was no point.

Feeling a bitter taste in his mouth, Sunny looked up.

The mountains had disappeared completely, swallowed by the seething haze of the Devouring Cloud. Numerous abominations blotted out the sky, making it seem as though the crimson lights of the aurora itself were spawning the all-consuming deluge of them. A minute or two later, the horde would flood the gorge and descend upon the convoy…

His only solace was that not even a fraction of the Nightmare Creatures would be able to satiate themselves with human flesh. There were too few humans in the convoy to fill their stomachs.

'Starve, the rest of you, bastards…'

Lacking a suitable weapon, Sunny could not even help his people in their last stand.

But... that was not his job. His most important job as a leader was to think, and yet, Sunny could not think of anything, either. The image of the map was still flashing in his mind, almost burned into it. All

the potential campsites and shelters he had marked in advance were too far away, and all the convenient roads he had scouted were useless.

Saint suddenly stepped back, and in the next moment, a corpse of one of the Brood beasts crashed into the roof of the Rhino. The APC shuddered, but continued to speed forward. A drop of fetid blood hit the visor of Sunny's helmet.

He inhaled deeply and stared at the ugly maw of the dead abomination, numb to its repulsive appearance.

Maw... these ghastly, hungry maws would soon be feasting on the flesh of his people.

A hungry maw…

Suddenly, a grim expression appeared on his face, hidden by the helmet.

Turning around, Sunny dove back into the hatch, noiselessly landed on the floor of the APC's floor, and dashed toward Luster.

'Where is it… where is it…'

Soon, one of his shadows noticed an old, almost entirely crumbled road that forked away from the main one a hundred or so meters ahead. The Rhino was just about to reach it…

"Turn left!"

Luster's hands reacted faster than his mind, sending the Rhino into a sharp turn. The vehicle trembled as its wheels left the somewhat intact surface of the better preserved road and entered the more dilapidated one.

The young man spared a glance at his captain.

"Sir? Where are we going?"

Sunny paled a little.

"...Into a hungry maw."

He did not need to explain further, really. Now that they had entered the derelict road, there was only one way — forward.

And there, ahead of them, waited something that he had hoped to avoid at all costs.

The dark portal of an old, abandoned tunnel.

Not too long ago, Sunny had sworn that he would never enter one.

But now, he could only pray that they would reach it…

Chapter-929: Swarm

As the convoy desperately drove toward the distant entrance of an old tunnel, the Devouring Cloud finally reached the gorge. The sky disappeared, blotted out by a slithering mass of the winged abominations, and submerged the world into impenetrable darkness. Even the dim glint of the shimmering stars was extinguished.

The swarm flowed down the slopes of the mountains like a tidal wave.

Penetrating the armored frame of the Rhino, a deafening rustle of countless beating wings assaulted Sunny's ears. He grimaced, glanced at the screens one last time, and dashed back to the roof hatch. Once he climbed outside, the noise grew many times more violent, making it seem as though a hurricane was raging around him.

The mass of Nightmare Creatures was seconds from swallowing the rearmost vehicles of the convoy. The overheated barrels of the turrets continued to discharge a barrage of bullets into the rushing wave of abominations, long tongues of flame blooming from their glowing muzzles. At that point, the soldiers did not even have to aim to hit the enemy… however, all their efforts were in vain.

Sunny would have needed thousands of soldiers and hundreds of heavy artillery vehicles to put a dent into the swarm of abhorrent abominations.

But he just needed to buy a little time…

"Saint!"

Following his mental command, the Shadow turned and threw Morgan's Warbow in his direction. Catching it, Sunny took a moment to balance himself on the swaying roof, and then drew the string with furious determination.

All four of his shadows flowed forward from his fingers.

A bolt of lightning streaked through the air, striking one of the Brood beasts. The creature's body disintegrated in a blinding flash, and then, dancing arcs of electricity spread through the swarm, stretching in all directions for dozens of meters. For a moment, the whole world was illuminated by a stark radiance.

…That bought the convoy a few more seconds, at most.

'Not enough…'

Even if Sunny had essence to spare, he could not use the Strike of Thunder repeatedly. Like almost all Memories, it needed time to be summoned and dismissed. Although the whole process took no more than a dozen seconds, right now, that was enough of a delay to doom them all.

If Winter was here, she would have had a solution… but, sadly, Sunny was all alone.

Well, not quite.

On the roof of one of the civilian transports, Samara overcharged her powerful rifle, causing some of the circuitry inside of it to melt in a rain of sparks. The usual electric whine of the activating coil was devoured by the cacophony of thousands of beating wings, but the thunderous roar of the resulting shot was not.

A brilliant particle of light traveled toward the swarm at a tremendous speed, and then detonated with staggering violence. A huge explosion shook the ground, swallowing a whole swath of attacking abominations.

Samara swayed and spat a mouthful of blood, showing signs of severe essence depletion, but the rest of the Irregulars were not remaining idle, either. The deluge of poisoned bullets and their Memories were doing their job, buying the convoy precious time. The tunnel was getting closer and closer…

But it was still not enough.

The rearmost military vehicle was already suffering under an onslaught of attacks. Its armored hull was being cut open and peeled off, and blood was flowing down its sides. The soldier that had been operating the turret was nowhere to be seen, but another had already taken his place — only to scream a moment later when the razor-sharp fangs of a frenzied Brood beast sunk into his arm.

As blood rained down, the soldier gritted his teeth and drew his sidearm, discharging several mundane bullets into the creature's neck without any result.

Sunny did not see the rest.

The Strike of Thunder had finally manifested itself back into existence, and the shadows had just returned, so he sent the caged lightning into the swarm once again.

Attracted by the Dying Wish, many abominations were ignoring the rest of the convoy and lunging at the Rhino. For now, none of them had gotten past Saint, who brandished the Sin of Solace as she protected him. However, Sunny knew that he was not going to remain safe for much longer.

Their salvation was so close…

And yet, their time was up.

Despite all their efforts, Sunny and his soldiers could not hold the Devouring Cloud back anymore. The convoy was already surrounded by the mass of Nightmare Creatures from all sides.

In stunned horror, Sunny watched as the rear vehicle was swallowed by the swarm of abominations. Its armor disintegrated as if made of paper, shredded into nothingness in a mere second. What followed…

'To hell with this!'

Before Sunny knew what he was doing, his body moved forward. Dashing to the back of the Rhino, he flooded his muscles with essence… and jumped.

'...I must have… gone crazy…'

Sunny soared into the air above the convoy, sensing sharp fangs scraping against the bleak steel of the Undying Chain. On his belt, a beautiful lantern cut of black stone suddenly opened, letting out a surge of darkness. Wreathed in that darkness, he plummeted down and landed on the roof of the damaged vehicle.

Dozens of tentacles exploded from the kneeling figure that was shrouded in shadows, tearing countless Brood beasts apart. More shadows flowed down like water, covering the breaches in the vehicle's hull and solidifying into impenetrable armor.

At the same time, black walls rose from the ground, surrounding the convoy. Hundreds of Brood beasts furiously crashed into them, causing the walls to shudder.

However, at least for the moment… they held.

Ahead of the column, the Rhino finally reached the tunnel and drove through its entrance, disappearing into the lightless emptiness within. One after another, the other vehicles, as well as a few Nightmare Creatures, followed. The abominations were swiftly gunned down or killed by the Irregulars.

The damaged vehicle that Sunny had landed on entered the old tunnel last, rolled forward for a few seconds, and then came to a screeching halt.

He fell down from its roof and hit the ground hard, then stood up with a stagger. Another wall of shadows rose, blocking the mouth of the tunnel behind them, this one much thicker than the previous ones.

Instantly, it came under a savage attack. Its black surface trembled, not cracking yet, but also visibly struggling to withstand the neverending rain of blows.

In the echoing silence of the tunnel, Sunny bent over, spat blood, and then tiredly looked up.

His voice sounded stifled:

"Someone better blow up that entrance, fast…"

Chapter-930: Old Tunnel

The convoy stopped soon after entering the tunnel. For a few moments, nothing apart from the muffled blows that continued to rain on the wall of shadows could be heard. Scared and exhausted, the people were all lost and slightly disoriented.

Sunny's voice brought them back to reality.

Glancing into the depths of the tunnel to make sure that nothing was attacking them from that direction — at least not yet — he backed up a little and studied the cold stones above him.

Surely, detonating a part of the tunnel's roof was not the smartest of ideas, considering how old it was. However, the alternative was even worse. They had to stop the Brood beasts from following the convoy inside, and his wall of shadows was not going to last long, considering how little essence Sunny had left.

He had truly burned through a lot of it during that last desperate dash to save the rear vehicles. Actually, Sunny had not even known that he was capable of doing something like that. The scope and scale of that complex use of Shadow Manifestation was unlike anything he had been able to achieve before.

The urgency of the situation and the raging adrenaline had helped him achieve a new level of mastery over his Aspect...

And now, he was exhausted. So, the entrance of the tunnel had to go.

'I'll feel really awkward if there's a collapsed section of it further ahead.'

Still, the convoy could find a way to dig through stone debris. They would not be able to resurrect from dead if the Devouring Cloud swallowed them whole, though.

...With the help of explosives that Sergeant Gere provided, Kim's ability to see weak points of both living and inanimate objects, and Professor Obel's knowledge of mundane science, they were able to detonate a few small charges and collapse the entrance of the tunnel, cutting themselves off from the outside world.

Now, there was no way back. Only forward, deeper into the darkness.

Nevertheless, the people were finally safe… relatively speaking, of course. They still did not know what awaited them ahead, in the eerie expanse of the old tunnel, so Sunny posted plenty of sentries in front of the Rhino. Only then did he have time to assess the state of things.

The convoy looked… battered. Every vehicle received at least a little damage, and many were splattered with blood of the Nightmare Creatures that the Irregulars and the mundane soldiers had killed. However, almost all of them could still move.

The only exception was the rear military vehicle that Sunny had saved. That one was a complete goner. In fact, it looked more like a heap of scrap metal than a working machine now — the fact that it had somehow managed to drive into the tunnel was nothing short of miraculous.

Its crew had suffered, too.

One of the soldiers was dead, and the rest were seriously wounded. A few of them would have died from those wounds, too, if not for Quentin. Currently, he was trying to stem the bleeding of a turret operator, whose arm was terribly mangled.

Even with the healer's abilities, the man's limb was too damaged to preserve. After taking one glance at the terrible mess of torn flesh and splintered bones, Sunny knew that it would have to be amputated.

He had already been in a somber mood because of the exhaustion, but now, it turned even darker. Perhaps he should be thanking the dead gods that only one of his men had been killed during the desperate escape from the Devouring Cloud… but Sunny did not feel

thankful.

Instead, he remembered the brazen claim he had made to Professor Obel not too long ago… a promise to try and save everyone who had entrusted their lives to him.

Sunny had already failed that promise twice. The death of the old refugee woman had been outside his control, but the fallen soldier… that one was a direct result of his decisions.

Sunny had killed many people in the past, but he had never been responsible for someone's death… or rather, had never experienced the death of someone whom he was responsible for.

It was a bitter, scathing feeling. Why did he have to bear the burden of some stranger's death? Who asked that soldier to be so weak?

Sunny clenched his fists.

'So… annoying.'

He remained motionless for a while, then winced.

In any case, the loss of a military vehicle was painful, but not impactful. Losing another civilian transport would have been much more damaging, not to mention lethal.

The wounded soldiers would be out of commission for a few days or longer, depending on the severity of their injuries, but in the end, they were going to survive.

All in all, they had all gotten off easy. Sunny had fully expected to watch the whole convoy be destroyed after finding out about the approaching horde of flying abominations. Losing just a single soldier, no matter how resentful he felt about it, was incredible luck.

…Of course, they were not out of the woods yet.

He did not know anything about the old tunnel, but suspected that traveling though it would not be very safe. In fact, his decision to seek shelter inside could potentially result in a fate similar, or even far worse, than being quickly gobbled up by the Devouring Cloud.

'Brimming with optimism, am I?'

Any kind of Nightmare Creatures could have built a nest here after the Chain of Nightmares came.

…More disturbingly, the tunnel could be home to something that had entered the waking world much earlier.

Humans did a good job of either closing or containing those Gates that opened within the borders or in the vicinity of population centers, out of necessity, but no one bothered or had resources to do the same in the wilderness. Provided, most Gates manifested near places where a lot of people lived… but not all.

Somewhere inside the tunnel, they could potentially meet an abomination that had been dwelling here for decades, or maybe even half a century.

Surely, there was also a possibility that there were no Nightmare Creatures inside, and they were completely safe. Honestly speaking, the chances of that were equally high.

…Unconvinced, Sunny walked to the front of the convoy, passed the massive form of the Rhino, and stopped near the sentries.

Up ahead, a long stretch of the tunnel was illuminated by the headlights of the APC. He stared into the darkness beyond.

After a while, Sunny looked down and let out a heavy sigh.

'That… does not bode well.'

He couldn't see anything.

Not in the sense that there was nothing ahead, but rather that he could not see through the gloom that enveloped the tunnel.

Which could mean only one thing…

That this place was not shrouded in shadows, but instead drowned by true, pure, elemental darkness.

Chapter-931: Rival of Light

True darkness was different from light and shadows.

Shadows existed in places where light was obscured or could not reach. If the shadow was vast and deep enough, people mistook it for darkness, but all it truly was was the absence of light.

True darkness, however, was more than that. It was an elemental force of its own, one that was both independent from and opposed to light. Instead of a simple lack of light, pure darkness was its rival.

And, since light and shadows always went hand in hand, it was also the enemy of shadows… strange as it may sound.

That was why Sunny suddenly felt the cold touch of unease when he discovered its presence.

True darkness was exceedingly rare and mysterious. He had only encountered it once before, in the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, where it had been born of and controlled by the cathedral's guardian… the Forsaken Knight. The bastard that had gutted him like a pig.

In fact, that unfortunate encounter had been the fault of the darkness that the Fallen Devil wielded. If not for its veil, Sunny might have not allowed the black knight to get so close.

That was because his eyes, which were capable of peering through any shadow, were as blind in true darkness as that of a mundane human. Sunny had not seen the approaching Forsaken Knight in the shroud of darkness, and now, he could not see into the depths of the tunnel.

Worse still…

The Fallen Devil of the ruined cathedral had only controlled a modest amount of true darkness. Here in the tunnel, however… there was a whole ocean of it.

Sunny grimaced.

'Well… there goes the hope that there are no abominations inside.'

He remained near the sentries for a minute or two, then turned around and tiredly walked back to the Rhino.

"We'll rest here for a few hours."

The convoy was not in any condition to continue moving, anyway. The vehicles needed to be repaired, and the wounded had to receive treatment. People desperately needed rest.

Plus, what good would it do to leave the tunnel before the Devouring Cloud moved on? They had to wait until the swarm passed through.

Sunny was exhausted, as well.

Entering the Rhino, he fell on one of the seats in the lounge area and closed his eyes.

'Why do I feel like we jumped out of the frying pan straight into the fire?'

Nothing good ever came from going underground... every time Sunny had, something nasty had been waiting for him there. His distrust of underground passages and tunnels was only rivaled by his dislike of the sea.

At least the tunnel seemed dry.

Scowling, Sunny tried to empty his mind and concentrate on circulating what little essence he had left through his body.

No matter what came next, he had to be ready.

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Samara was recovering from utterly depleting her essence, and Quentin was busy healing the injured soldiers. Kim and Luster were performing field repairs on the civilian transports. The Sleeper was creating a new batch of poisoned bullets to replace those expended during the flight from the Devouring Cloud… Sergeant Gere's ammunition reserves were at a point where each round had to count.

Only Belle and Dorn had nothing to do, which was why Sunny chose them to accompany him on a scouting mission. He wanted to find out how far the exit from the tunnel was, or if not, then at least explore a long stretch of it before leading the convoy forward.

Nobody knew how long the tunnel was. There were a lot of them cut through the mountains in the Antarctic center, where the terrain was too uneven to build straight roads. Whenever a road met a mountain outcropping that was too wide to go around, though, people had often chosen to simply burrow through it to create a convenient shortcut.

As a result, the length of tunnels varied greatly, from several dozen meters to ten kilometers or more. Most of them had been created during the Dark Times.

Later, when the constant wars, environmental cataclysms, and the descent of the Nightmare Spell had reduced human population and concentrated it inside a small amount of vast and easily defended cities, most of the mountain roads went out of use and were abandoned.

So, there was no information on the tunnel. It could have been only a few hundreds meters long, or stretched forward for a dozen kilometers. Considering the local terrain, Sunny suspected that the latter would turn out closer to the truth.

Summoning the Cruel Sight, he glanced at Belle and Dorn.

"Are you ready?"

They nodded.

"Yes, sir."

They were standing in front of the Rhino. A few people were looking at the three Irregulars, but only Professor Obel approached to see them off.

"Be careful, young people. Places such as this can be quite dangerous. Don't use any Memories or Abilities that have to do with fire, too… now that we are underground, it would be all too easy to burn all the oxygen away."

Sunny looked at the old man with a bit of tension hidden behind his outwardly confident expression.

"Anything else we should know?"

Professor Obel thought for a moment, then shrugged.

"Many of these tunnels went through several rounds of additional excavation to serve as bomb shelters during the latter stages of the war between the… ah, but those names probably won't tell you much. Suffice it to say, you might find that the structure of the tunnel is not as straightforward as one might expect."

Sunny sighed.

"Alright. We are going, then. If we aren't back after two hours… well, I am not going to lie, if something manages to kill me, then all of you will probably die soon, too. So, there's nothing much you'll be able to do at that point."

He tried to force out an encouraging smile, failed, and simply turned around.

Carrying luminous Memories, Sunny and his people walked past the nervous sentries, and dove into the darkness without looking back.

Chapter-932: Blinded

Sunny had grown accustomed to using his shadows to scout ahead in dangerous situations, explore the world around him, and discover hidden threats. However, this time, he could not — simply because the shadows were as blind as him in the embrace of true darkness.

Walking deeper into the tunnel, he instantly felt tense and incredibly vulnerable. Things were even worse than Sunny had thought. Not only was his sight suddenly limited to a mere single point of view, not only could he not see anything outside the narrow circle of light created by the luminous Memories like a mere human…

Even his ability to sense the shapes and movements of shadows was crippled. Because, of course, no shadow existed within darkness.

That unique part of his perception had become so ingrained into him that now that it was gone, Sunny felt blinded. It was as though he suddenly lost his eyes and ears. The whole world seemed strange, unclear, and muddled.

The sudden change was so severe that he almost lost balance.

'D—damn…'

Belle and Dorn, who lived their whole lives like that, did not seem to be disturbed. Sure, they had somewhat come to rely on the ability to see in darkness that Kim often shared to them, but not to a degree where it became their second nature.

Sunny, on the other hand…

He was disoriented, and felt utterly exposed.

'How horrible…'

Grimacing, he gripped the shaft of the Cruel Sight tighter and continued walking. The blade of the somber spear did not shine yet, instead absorbing some of the light produced by the lanterns of the Irregulars, in case he needed it in the future.

The tunnel was wide enough for two vehicles to pass each other without brushing sides, and utterly empty. Nothing but impenetrable darkness filled its silent expanse, and so, their steps echoed, reflecting from the cold stone walls.

Sunny glanced at Belle and Dorn with a bit of displeasure. He was walking as noiselessly as usual, trained to remain unnoticed by the long months of hunting down powerful abominations in the Dark City. However, the two fighters of the melee vanguard were not versed in stealth, and their equipment was not suited for it, either.

'Way to announce our position to everyone… and every thing. I have a bad feeling about this...'

Although many Nightmare Creatures possessed some way to perceive the world in the absence of light, he was still used to being the one to stalk his prey unseen. Now, however, the roles were reversed… Sunny was at the mercy of whatever creature it was that hid in the darkness.

And there had to be something there, without a doubt.

True darkness, after all, had not come from nothing.

'What kind of ghastly horror will I have to fight this time?'

They carefully moved forward, sticking close to the wall of the tunnel. A few minutes passed, then a dozen. What Sunny feared the most did not happen — nothing attacked them, and there were no collapsed sections of the tunnel's roof that could block the convoy's way out.

However, there was also no sign of exit.

The tunnel simply stretched forward, seemingly endlessly, and completely empty. After a while, Sunny managed to shrug off his discomfort and adjust to having his perception severely crippled, as

well as he could.

It was still deeply disturbing, though.

Half an hour passed without them encountering any threats.

"How far do you think we have walked?"

Belle and Dorn thought for a moment. The giant man shrugged.

"Three kilometers? Maybe less."

A deep frown appeared on Sunny's face.

Three kilometers was not a small amount. Of course, there were far longer tunnels out there… the floor also seemed flat and did not slope neither up nor down.

Still, it was strange that they had not been attacked yet.

"...Keep your eyes open."

The small scouting squad continued forward. After a while, they encountered a small opening in the wall of the tunnel, leading into the depths of the mountain. The narrow branch, too, was drowned in true darkness.

Standing near it, Sunny thought that he heard a distant hum. However, a moment later, it was gone, chased away by Dorn's voice.

"This must be one of the additional tunnel shafts that Professor Obel spoke about. There's probably a whole network of them inside the mountain, excavated to house the population in case of a nuclear strike."

Belle scratched the back of his head.

"Who uses nuclear bombs to kill people? Aren't bioweapons far more effective?"

Sunny looked at him darkly.

"Tell that to Europe."

At that moment, Dorn cleared his throat.

"Actually, Captain, they used both nuclear and bioweapons in Europe."

'Oh.'

Well, it was not like Sunny had received a good education. He had barely known that places other than NQSC existed before the fateful conversation with Master Jet.

In any case, he had to decide whether they should explore the side branch of the tunnel or continue forward along the main one. In the end, he chose to stick to their current path.

He did not really care what was out there, in the old network of abandoned passages. As long as the convoy could drive past and reach the exit, Sunny did not have to know.

They walked, and walked, and walked.

...And nothing happened.

At some point, the lack of terrible Nightmare Creatures lunging at them from the darkness started to disturb Sunny more than the possibility of a sudden attack.

'This is too eerie…'

Eventually, the one hour mark passed without them finding anything — not the source of the true darkness, not the Nightmare Creatures that might have made a nest in the tunnel, and not the exit.

There was not even a hint of it.

"Stop."

Sunny frowned as he looked forward.

There was nothing but darkness ahead.

In the end, he sighed and turned around. The scouting mission was

both a resounding success and a resounding failure. They did not find any active threats to the convoy, but they also failed to conclusively prove that there were none.

In any case, the time he had allotted for the scouting mission was up.

"Let's head back."

Now, his best choice was to lead the convoy forward and hope for the best.

Despite the lack of Nightmare Creatures — or of anything, really — inside the tunnel, Sunny felt very uneasy.

Chapter-933: Darkness at the End of the Tunnel

Braving the silent darkness, they retraced their steps and arrived back to the collapsed entrance of the tunnel after a long and tense hour. Nothing dangerous happened on their way back, and the convoy seemed to have fared well in their absence, too.

The uneventfulness of it all was deeply disturbing.

Hiding his concern, Sunny glanced at the dark walls surrounding them. The battered vehicles stood motionlessly, their wheels resting on the cold asphalt floor. Here and there, people could be seen resting or hurrying to complete various tasks.

'...I don't like this.'

Frowning, he headed toward the hatch of the Rhino. The people he needed to hear from were already gathered there, ready to report the state of things.

As Sunny passed the sentries, one of them suddenly called out to him.

"Captain Sunless, sir…"

He slowed down and gave the soldier a dark look.

"Yes?"

The man hesitated for a few moments. His face was still, but his tired eyes were full of some unknown, intense emotion.

"Outside, I was part of the rear vehicle's crew. What you did for us back then, near the end… you really saved us. Thank you, sir."

Sunny stared at him blankly for a bit, then turned away with a scoff.

"I am in charge of this convoy. These are my vehicles, and you are my people. No one takes what's mine… especially without paying a price. Do you even know how much a vehicle like that costs?"

With that, he shook his head and walked away.

'What a weird guy…'

The Irregulars, as well as Sergeant Gere, Professor Obel, and Beth were waiting in the command suite of the Rhino. Sunny received several reports, which slightly improved his mood.

The convoy had lost one civilian transport and one military vehicle as the result of encountering the Devouring Cloud. Luckily, it did not affect their logistics too adversely. After sacrificing the mobile infirmary to accommodate the displaced refugees, all they had really lost was a bit of firepower.

The remaining vehicles had all been patched up and ready to move.

Sergeant Gere sighed.

"We don't have a lot of ammunition left, sir. Additionally, our reserves of drinking water are also severely reduced. We discarded a lot of it to lighten the load on the transports before the swarm arrived. It should not become a problem in the next several days, but after that…"

Sunny waved a hand dismissively.

"Don't worry about water. I have a literally endless source of water."

He remained silent for a while, considering the options. They could either pass through the tunnel, or remain where they were and try to dig their way out when some time had passed.

Both options were less than ideal.

'It all comes down to how long I want to remain in the tunnel, it seems.'

The first option would allow the convoy to escape from underground

sooner… if all went well during the drive to the opposite exit. The second option would force them to stay inside for much longer, but did not demand diving deeper into the chilling darkness. Neither was free of risk.

'Curses…'

In the end, Sunny just really disliked the idea of staying in the eerie tunnel even a minute longer than it was necessary.

He sighed.

"Start the engines. We're leaving."

A few minutes later, the Rhino came to life and rolled forward, slowly gaining speed. The beams of powerful spotlights installed on its roof cut through the darkness, forcing it to flee and cling to the walls of the tunnel. The civilian transports and the military vehicles followed, staying close to the massive APC.

The darkness flowed back and devoured everything once again behind them, making it seem as though the convoy was traveling inside a small, fleeting, fragile island of light.

Sunny climbed to the roof of the Rhino and stayed there with Saint, staring into the darkness with a grim expression on his face. He was still blind to everything that was happening outside the small bubble of light, which made him incredibly nervous.

'Where is it… where is the source of all this darkness? When will it attack?'

Minutes passed, but just like during the scouting mission, nothing happened.

The convoy rolled forward with modest, but constant speed. Meter after meter of old asphalt disappeared under the wheels of the Rhino, and the stone walls seemed to move past them, vanishing into the darkness. The tunnel was silent, with only the passing of the human vehicles making any noise.

From time to time, side passages opened up to either left or right of

the convoy, making Sunny especially nervous. All these paths sloped down, leading deeper underground. He was prepared for something to lunge at them from the darkness… but nothing did.

'Ignore them… we don't need to set foot in those passages. We just need to reach the exit and escape this dreadful place.'

Just like that, an hour passed, and then another, and another. The tunnel continued to stretch forward, seemingly endless. The more time passed, the deeper Sunny's scowl became.

…After a while, he finally left the roof of the Rhino and dove back into its interior with a dark expression. Walking up to Luster, he ground his teeth and said:

"That's enough. Stop the convoy."

Luster glanced at him questioningly, then shrugged.

The APC slowed down, and then stopped. The other vehicles followed suit, and soon, the whole convoy came to a halt.

Sunny left the Rhino and stood still for a few moments, staring at the weathered asphalt. Sergeant Gere and the members of his cohort soon approached from the direction of other vehicles, while Luster, Professor Obel, and Beth exited the Rhino through the hatch. Saint walked over to the edge of the roof, looking at them from above indifferently.

Most of the gathered people had grave expressions on their faces.

Noticing the grim mood, Luster blinked a couple of times, then turned to Sunny.

"Uh… Captain? Why did we stop? Is there a problem?"

Sunny looked at him silently.

"...Yes, there is a problem, you fool. Can't you tell?"

Luster scratched the back of his head.

"What, is there a Nightmare Creature ahead?"

Sunny sighed, then looked up.

"No… there's nothing ahead. That's the problem. We've been driving for about seven hours, correct? What was our average speed?"

The young man hesitated for a moment.

"Thirty kilometers per hour, sir."

They had not rushed and kept a modest speed, to be able to react in case danger appeared from ahead.

Sunny nodded.

"That is more than two hundred kilometers of going straight forward. And yet, there is no exit. Do you see the problem now?"

Luster's eyes suddenly widened.

"Oh… well, if you put it like that… it really is weird…"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"It's not just weird. If there was a tunnel of that length in Antarctica, it would have been the longest one in the world, by far. Everyone would have known about it."

Luster paled a little, then studied everyone's faces.

"How come no one did, then? Sir?"

Sunny looked down and shook his head.

"There is only one possible answer. This tunnel… something is very, very wrong with it."

Chapter-934: No Way Out

There could not have been a tunnel that stretched under the Antarctic Center for hundreds of kilometers. Not only would a structure like that be a miraculous feat of engineering, but far too many people — especially the army strategist and someone as knowledgeable as Professor Obel — would be aware of its existence.

However, no one had been.

Sunny remained silent for a while, then looked at the old man. Professor Obel simply shook his head.

"I am afraid I can't explain. Which… is not too surprising. After the Nightmare Spell descended, there are many things in the world that science — or rather, our limited scientific understanding — fails to explain."

Sunny sighed.

'Great.'

What was he supposed to do now?

It was clear that the laws of nature were either broken or worked differently inside the tunnel. Space was not behaving as it was supposed to behave… or maybe they had simply traveled to some strange pocket dimension that was filled with nothing but true darkness.

Maybe they were all under the influence of another mind hex. Maybe they had all been devoured by the swarm of Brood beasts, and were now condemned to an eternal purgatory.

Who could tell?

Sunny cursed silently, then wrapped all four shadows around the Undying Chain to ramp up its mental protection. Nothing changed. The oppressive darkness did not disappear… if anything, it seemed even more foreboding now.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

"Alright. Let's not panic yet."

Sunny looked around, then walked to the wall of the tunnel and struck it with his fist. A startling bang rolled through the tunnel, echoing in the darkness. In the place where his steel gauntlet had landed, a small impression appeared, with a net of cracks spreading from it through the cold stone.

"Get back into your vehicles."

Everyone followed his instructions without asking questions. The convoy continued to move forward. However, this time, Sunny made it stop after ten minutes and left the Rhino alone.

Wrapping the shadows around his body, he activated the [Light Eater] enchantment of the Cruel Sight to illuminate the path and ran back into the darkness. Moving much faster than the vehicles had, he soon reached the point of the previous stop and studied the cracked section of the wall, then made his way back.

The convoy moved for another ten minutes. After that, Sunny commanded them to put the vehicles in reverse — the tunnel was not wide enough for the Rhino and the civilian transports to turn around — and drive back.

After a while, he gave the order to stop.

'...This is bad.'

His seemingly erratic actions, of course, had not been without a reason.

Sunny already knew that it was possible to go back to a previously visited spot inside the tunnel — Belle, Dorn, and himself had walked for around six kilometers during the initial scouting, and then safely

returned to the convoy.

The first stop he had ordered was to make sure that the same principle still applied. Indeed, he had been able to return to the marked portion of the wall from five kilometers away.

The second stop was to test if something would change with more distance… and it had.

They should have long seen the imprint of his fist and the net of cracks around it, but there was none. At some point in time, somewhere between five and ten kilometers of separation, the mark had disappeared without a trace.

Which was very, very bad news for Sunny.

It meant that they could not return to the collapsed exit from the tunnel. The way back, and the second option he had of escaping to the surface, did not exist anymore.

Staring into the darkness, Sunny felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

If he had led the scouting party a few kilometers further… would they have been separated from the convoy forever? Would they be doomed to wander the darkness alone, for the rest of their lives?

He had come close to disaster without even knowing it.

'I was lucky.'

One of his worst fears had become reality. Sunny was more than capable of fighting against enemies that he could strike down, even if their strength seemed overwhelming.

However, he was as powerless as the rest against circumstances like the one they found themselves in right now — against threats that were both unseen and unexplainable, dooming those who encountered them silently and without warning.

Simply by existing.

Against threats like that, he needed someone like Cassie. Sadly, she was far away, probably preparing for the war between Valor and Song with the rest of the Fire Keepers.

'...Damnation!'

He looked at the stone walls of the tunnel, then at the battered vehicles of the convoy. There were almost four hundred people in them that he had promised to rescue… was he going to become a liar?

Sunny tilted his head a little, then blinked.

'Wait, what nonsense am I thinking about? I have always been a liar! There's nothing for me to become…'

He took a deep breath.

'No… no, it is alright. I'll find a way out.'

After all, he did not need to understand the nature of the trap. He just had to break it.

Somehow…

Sunny rubbed his face, glanced at the darkness one last time, and gestured for Luster to continue driving the Rhino forward. Before anything else, they had to make sure that there was really no limit to the strange endlessness of the dark tunnel.

The convoy traveled through the darkness, traversing kilometer after kilometer. More hours passed with nothing changing. Then, some more.

Eventually, an entire day was gone. Slowly, a sense of dread was spreading through the exhausted refugees and the mundane soldiers. Even the Irregulars seemed tense.

Sunny commanded everyone to stop and make camp. People needed rest, and nothing would improve if they persisted forward despite everything.

As the soldiers started cooking food and arranging sleeping places for the civilians, he walked some distance away from them and called Sergeant Gere over.

Gere jogged to where Sunny stood, half-swallowed by darkness, and asked in a hoarse voice:

"Yes, Captain? Did you need something?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, looking back at the convoy. Then, he looked at the sergeant and said:

"Yeah. I have two questions for you… how much food do we have left? And how long will the fuel cells of the transports last?"

Chapter-935: Unmoored

While the people of the convoy were settling in to rest, Sunny observed them with a dark expression on his pale face. Finally, he winced and headed back into the Rhino.

There, the Irregulars were waiting, unsure what to do. It was not like he had answers, either, but Sunny had to decide what their next steps would be.

He hesitated for a few moments.

"Luster, Samara, and Dorn. Go to sleep and report our situation. Perhaps Army Command has some idea about what we are dealing with here."

Despite the ominous nature of the dark tunnel, things weren't as bleak as they seemed. The convoy was cut off from the First Evacuation Army in terms of actual support, but information still flowed between the cohort and their superiors.

Somewhere in the government databases, there had to be a hint on how to escape the endless darkness. Even if no one had ever encountered its source before, people would have clashed against something similar in the past.

…If not, Sunny would venture into the Dream Realm himself and seek out Cassie. With her powerful divination abilities, she was his best bet. More than that, he could transport food and other resources from the Ivory Tower with the help of the Covetous Coffer, so his people were not going to starve.

For now, time was not their enemy. They just had to find a way to solve the puzzle, and escape.

He sighed.

'Unless something changes for the worse…'

In any case, there was no point in panicking yet. Sunny watched as three of his soldiers climbed into the sleeping pods, then sent the rest to keep watch over the refugees.

The oppressive veil of darkness that muted his senses was still there, grinding on Sunny's nerves. He was tired, too.

'At least there is no Call here.'

In fact, this was the first time in a long while when Sunny did not hear the Call at all. Everywhere else in the Antarctic Center, it kept whispering quietly into the ears of Awakened, but here in the dark tunnel, the whispers were gone. He was not sure if that was a good sign or a bad omen.

'We'll see soon.'

Ordering his shadows to observe the temporary camp, Sunny climbed into a sleeping niche himself. Things were going to get better after he slept… if nothing else, his reserves of essence would be somewhat replenished. That alone was enough to make him feel more confident.

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That night, Sunny had a nightmare. He dreamt of the ditch that he had crawled into after being gutted by the Forsaken Knight, and of cold, overflowing darkness. That was an unpleasant surprise, since he had grown accustomed to sleeping peacefully — ever since the Kingdom of Hope, his dreams were usually guarded by Nightmare.

If a bad dream appeared, it was promptly destroyed or subjugated by the shadow steed.

But now that Nightmare was himself slumbering after receiving wounds, Sunny was left without his protection.

'...Too bad.'

Feeling less rested than he would have preferred to, Sunny went to the command suite of the Rhino and studied the monitors to get a

glimpse of the convoy's camp. Everything seemed to be in order… the shadows would have woken him up if anything happened, but it was nice to make sure.

He lingered for a while, then walked over to the kitchen area to brew himself some coffee. Some time later, carrying a steaming cup, Sunny returned to the living area and leaned on a bulkhead. With nothing else to do, he simply stared at the closed panels that hid the sleeping niches.

The Awakened he had sent to the Dream Realm were going to return soon.

Finally, when his coffee was almost gone, one of the panels slid away, revealing the insides of the pod. There, Luster slowly opened his eyes and looked directly at Sunny.

Then, the young man flinched back with a startled expression on his face.

"C—captain? What are you doing here?!"

Sunny silently brought the cup to his lips and took a sip.

"I am drinking coffee, fool. What does it look like I'm doing?"

Luster opened his mouth, then closed it. He seemed to be very confused.

"No, I mean, what are you doing in my Citadel? How did you get here? That doesn't… wait…"

He finally looked around, realizing that he was inside the Rhino. However, Luster's confusion only grew.

"That… is not my Citadel…"

Sunny frowned, studying the young man's expression.

"Why would you think that you are inside a Citadel?"

Luster blinked a couple of times.

"...Well, that is how things work, right? You go to sleep in the real world, and are sent to the Dream Realm."

'Don't tell me…'

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

"So what you are trying to say is that you did not return from the Dream Realm? You fell asleep in the waking world, and woke up in the real world?"

Luster let out a nervous laugh.

"Ha! That's impossible. Awakened don't stay in the real world when we sleep. But also… yes? The last thing I remember is settling inside the pod… sir."

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched.

It seemed that the impossible had just happened. An Awakened fell asleep without being transported to the Dream Realm.

Luster's soul had remained in the dark tunnel.

…So did the souls of Kim and Samara. When they woke up shortly after, the result was the same — they had been confused and startled. None of the three had managed to reach a Citadel.

'That is not good, not good at all…'

Without saying much, Sunny reached within himself and tried to sense the familiar pull — the pull of his anchor in the Dream Realm. Usually, as long as he concentrated on the anchor, he would initiate the process of traveling across worlds.

However, this time, there was nothing. No matter how hard he searched, his soul seemed devoid of the Dream Realm's pull.

His connection to the Ivory Tower was gone, just like the Call.

Suddenly cold, Sunny glanced at the sea of darkness surrounding the fragile island of light where hundreds of refugees were trapped,

shivering as they slept.

'...What the hell is this place?'

Chapter-936: Anything That Can Go Wrong

'I should have known that something like that would happen…'

During one of his conversations with Professor Obel, Sunny had learned of a thing called Murphy's Law. Anything that can go wrong will go wrong… he did not know who Murphy was and why that person had been in a position to establish world-governing laws, but their veracity was hard to dispute.

…Perhaps that Murphy had been a bit of a tenacious cockroach himself, to come up with such an undeniable rule.

In any case, that was exactly what had happened. Everything had gone wrong. Sunny had hoped to receive information and resources through the Dream Realm, but now, that hope was destroyed. The strange nature of the endless tunnel prevented Awakened from traveling across worlds.

He had not even known that something like that was possible.

'Damnation.'

Instructing the members of the cohort to keep the news to themselves, Sunny hesitated for a bit, and then gave the convoy an order to break camp. They had to continue moving forward.

At that point, he did not expect to reach the exit… however, Sunny still needed information. The tunnel was not looping on itself, as yesterday's experiments had proved, so there had to be some other type of magic involved. He suspected that it was spatial in nature, but had to observe more to come to a reliable conclusion.

The Rhino rolled forward, and the civilian transports followed. Once

again, they waded through the silent darkness, cutting it with beams of light. Stone walls flew by, and since their surface always looked the same, it was easy to imagine that the convoy was not moving at all, and was instead stuck in place, cursed to repeat the same moment in time over and over again.

The only thing that broke the monotony were the foreboding entrances to the side passages that occasionally appeared from either left or right.

…Sunny knew that the most logical solution would be to try and explore them instead of stubbornly trying to reach the exit of the main tunnel. However, he felt reluctant to do so, at least for now. It was as though everything was forcing him to make that decision… which was exactly what sent his paranoia into overdrive.

'It's almost like something is trying to lure us deeper underground... curse it...'

The side passages were too narrow for the Rhino to pass, anyway. And he was not going to abandon the APC unless absolutely necessary.

Sunny did pay the side passages a lot of attention, though. As he studied the entrances and the darkness that shrouded them, a small hint of suspicion appeared in his mind.

Apart from that, he was not remaining idle… even if it might have looked like that to the rest of the people riding inside the Rhino.

Throughout the next day, Sunny remained in his chair in the command suite. He did glance at the screens from time to time, but rarely. Mostly, he just moved his fingers in a strange way, making it seem as though they were performing a complicated dance.

At some point, Beth couldn't stay quiet anymore and asked in an irritated tone:

"What on Earth are you doing? Are you trying to cast a magic spell, or something?"

There was deep unease and fear hidden behind that annoyance,

though.

Sunny smiled.

"...Actually, that is exactly what I am trying to do. I am an amateur sorcerer, you see."

The young woman scoffed.

"Fine, don't tell me. I guess you finally lost your mind!"

But Sunny had told her the truth. Although she could not see them, he was actually weaving strings of essence between his fingers.

At that point, Sunny was proficient enough to not cut off any of his fingers in the process, like he had in the Red Colosseum. There was not even a single cut on them. However, creating strings of shadow essence — not to mention arranging them into an actual weave — required a lot of time, concentration, and, most of all, of essence itself.

That was why he had not been able to practice weaving a lot, if at all, after disembarking in Antarctica. The Chain of Nightmare was too dire and hectic, and demanded too much of him to waste those precious resources on unnecessary things.

…But now, things were different.

By the end of the second day inside the tunnel, Sunny was able to create enough strings to turn an object into a Memory. He needed a bit more for what he wanted to achieve, though, so he continued with the task through the night.

On the third day of traveling though darkness, when people turned quiet and fear spread through the convoy like a plague, he produced Weaver's Needle from the Covetous Coffer, as well as one of the Transcendent soul shards he had stored there before.

Any shard would have worked, but Sunny only had these at hand.

The needle glowed with soft golden radiance. Using it to create the basic weaves, he began the process of turning it into a Memory.

Doing so was relatively easy for him, since he had done so many times in the past.

This time, however, there was an especially thorny part of the process. Sunny had learned how to name Memories through their weave at some point, but each rune took time and additional strings to create. Learning how to weave runes had not been easy, either, and had required both a good understanding of weaves and a deep knowledge of the runic language the Spell used.

He could skip that step, of course, in which case the Memory would be simply called [???] by the Spell.

But Sunny was going for something else this time.

In the end, he tiredly put the needle down and let out a shaky breath. Both Professor Obel and Beth were staring at him with curiosity.

The old man had not wanted to break Sunny's concentration before, but now he finally asked:

"Young man… I am sorry, but could you perhaps explain what you were doing these past two days? I must admit, it looked quite bizarre in the start, but now, we are both very intrigued."

Sunny smiled.

"Ah… I was preparing to send a message."

With that, he dismissed the needle, which disappeared into a rain of golden sparks, making both Professor Obel and Beth blink.

Then, Sunny summoned the runes and looked at the list of his Memories.

Visible only to him, the runes shimmered in the air.

[Sin of Solace], [Bitter Cusp], [Stifled Scream]...

...And then, the last one:

Memory: [I Am Stuck in an Endless Tunnel Full of True Darkness.

How the Hell Do I Get Out? Ask Cassie].

Memory Rank: Transcendent.

Memory Tier: I…

The corner of his eye twitched.

'What an ugly sight. I'll definitely rename it later…'

Chapter-937: Exchanging Messages

The Memory Sunny had created was, of course, a message to Nephis. The [Shadow Bond] that connected them was an innate Ability of his Aspect, and as such, existed outside of the Spell. It did not matter that the convoy was isolated from the Dream Realm… their tenuous link remained active.

Sunny knew it because he himself was still able to see Neph's runes, so she should have been able to see his, as well.

'Well, that's done…'

The only question was how soon would Nephis see the message, and how long would it take for her to come up with a response. Sunny suspected that he was going to have to wait for a while.

Morgan's Warbow proved that forgemasters of clan Valor were capable of naming the Memories they created. However, he did not know how high Changing Star's standing in the great clan was at the moment, and if it was possible for her to charge them with forging a specific Memory for her, let alone do it quickly.

In any case, he was sure that she would come up with something. Nephis was a frighteningly resourceful person, when she needed to be.

…Kind of like Sunny himself.

'It won't be fast, though.'

With a sigh, he glanced at Professor Obel and Beth.

"The message is sent. Now, we just need to wait for a response."

The convoy continued its meaningless march. Hour after hour, the small column of vehicles drove through the overflowing darkness, their sense of time and direction slowly disappearing. The dark tunnel was just too eerie, inexorable, and unchanging. Everything there seemed like a strange, foreboding dream.

From time to time, one of the vehicles would break down, forcing them to stop for quick repairs. The Rhino was operating on an advanced spelltech engine, which meant that its fuel was soul essence. Luster was more than capable of keeping the APC moving indefinitely.

The military vehicles had primitive spelltech batteries serving as a backup energy source for their hybrid systems, so he was able to help the soldiers, too.

The civilian transports, however, were entirely mundane in nature. Their fuel cells were immaculately designed and possessed a vast charge capacity, but were going to get exhausted sooner or later.

Although it did not seem like it, Sunny knew that the convoy was on a clock.

They drove for the rest of the day, and then made camp.

The next day went by in the same manner. Sunny spent it on the roof of the Rhino, staring at the entrances to the side passages that would sometimes appear in the stone walls of the tunnel.

By that time, they had traveled more than a thousand kilometers inside the tunnel. If this place was abiding by the laws of nature, the convoy would have been passing under Erebus Field, their final destination, right about now.

With no mountains to climb and no Nightmare Creatures to fight, only the straight road and no obstacles ahead, the distance that Sunny had hoped to cover in weeks was traversed in a few days.

He doubted that it would translate to the same amount of covered ground in the real world, though.

…Two days after he had sent his message, Nephis finally responded.

Sunny had actually not expected to receive an answer so soon, but there it was. He habitually summoned the runes to check on Neph, and then blinked a couple of times, noticing that the list of her Memories seemed much longer than it had been before.

Ever since Changing Star joined hands with Valor, her soul arsenal improved by a lot. There were certainly benefits to being an adopted daughter of a great clan, so she would occasionally receive a Memory or two.

It seemed that she was being provided with a constant stream of soul shards, as well, even if their influx had slowed at some point, most likely to hide the fact that Nephis possessed multiple cores.

'I am not envious at all… yeah… I am not regretting my decisions… even a little bit!'

Sunny glanced at the dismal walls of the dark tunnel, then at the battered convoy, the desperate people who clung to what little warmth they could find inside the ramshackle vehicles, and sighed.

Then, he looked back at the runes, which showed that Nephis had gained fifteen new Memories in the span of a couple of days.

Even if she was being nurtured by a great clan, that was too many.

Frowning, he read the names of the new Memories:

'Faint Glimmer, Ire Hearth, Nebulous Veil, Dire Warning, Haunting Eversong, Eager Cut, Altar of Denial, Rust Reaver, Testament of Malice…'

And six more.

None of them seemed to have been created by the forgemasters of Valor.

Sunny scoffed.

'...Clever.'

Smiling faintly in the darkness, he read the first letter of each

Memory in order.

What he ended up with was a concise message:

FINDHEARTCUTRUN.

'Find heart… cut… run.'

The meaning was quite clear. He had to seek out the heart of the true darkness that drowned the tunnel, destroy it, and then run as fast as he could. The first two parts did not promise anything good, but the last one was downright ominous.

Sunny did not know what Cassie had seen or learned, but she would not have included the word "run" if the consequences of destroying the mysterious Heart of Darkness were anything short of terrifying.

However, how was he supposed to find it? And if that thing was so frightening, how was he going to destroy it?

'Really now, would it have killed them to be more specific?'

He shook his head with a bitter expression.

Well, it must have not been easy to scrounge up fifteen new Memories, let alone ones with names that could be arranged into a simple cipher. So, Sunny thought that he should be thankful.

'Yeah... thank you kindly.'

Regardless of how he felt, the course of action was rather clear.

As Sunny stared at the walls of the tunnel that flew by, a dark entrance to a side passage appeared in view. What little of it could be seen showed a narrow road that sloped down at a steep angle.

He quietly grimaced.

'I guess I won't be able to avoid crawling deeper underground, in the end... how unexpected.'

Chapter-938: Food Delivery

The convoy had stopped once again. This time, however, there was one significant difference to the place Sunny had chosen to set camp — it was situated near one of the side passages, which they had avoided at all costs in the past.

Currently, the Irregulars were gathered around the dark entrance, staring at it with gloomy expressions on their faces.

Sunny did not look too enthused, either.

After a while, he sighed and glanced at his subordinates.

"Have any of you noticed it?"

They looked at each other, not sure what to say. After a while, Dorn spoke in a somber voice:

"What exactly were we supposed to notice, Captain?"

Sunny silently shook his head.

In the past few days, he had been observing the side passages attentively as the convoy passed them, trying to see if there was a pattern to when and where they appeared. The tunnel looked to be endless, after all, so it seemed that there was an endless amount of these branching paths, too… which was a bit weird.

In the process of observing the side passages, a sinking sense of suspicion took hold of his heart, and by now, that suspicion was all but confirmed.

He frowned.

"Well, I don't blame you. It's pretty hard to notice."

Then, Sunny pointed at a particular spot on the stone wall of the tunnel, right where it made way for the open chasm of the entrance to the side passage.

"There's a small protrusion there, and on the opposite side, the stone is chipped near the floor. There's also that crack over there."

They stared at the spots he showed, not quite sure of the meaning of these small, barely noticeable features.

"What about them?"

Sunny lingered for a moment.

"Nothing, really, in and of itself. But if you watched closely, you would have seen that these exact imperfections are present at each of the entrances we passed in the last couple of days. The first one we saw during the initial scouting had them, too. With how rough the walls of the tunnel are, it is only expected that there would be nothing smooth about the side passages, but still.

Exact cracks, at exactly the same spots, at hundreds of entrances… don't you think it's strange?"

Luster stared at the chipped portion of the wall, then scratched the back of his head.

"I don't get it. Did someone leave these marks on purpose?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. What I am trying to say is that there are no hundreds of entrances. There's just one entrance, and one side passage, repeating over and over across the tunnel. All these entrances we saw were the same, and lead to the same place."

The Irregulars paled. After a long stretch of grim silence, Belle finally spoke:

"So, we are being invited somewhere."

Noticing his carefree smile, Kim shivered.

"...More like being lured somewhere, don't you think?"

The swordsman just shrugged.

"Well, an invitation has to be alluring, right? Otherwise, no one will come."

Kim stared at him with a deadpan expression for a few moments, then turned to Sunny.

"So what are we going to do, Captain?"

Sunny echoed Belle's smile, making her eyes widen slightly.

"What else? We are going to answer the invitation, of course. Sure, it all seems like a dreadful trap… after all, the damned tunnel more or less left us no choice but to try and explore the side passage. It's an ingenious food delivery system, if you think about it… the food delivers itself.

We are the food in this metaphor, of course, and we are going to deliver ourselves to whatever it is that's waiting underground."

Belle's eyes glinted.

"And then we eat it instead of it eating us?"

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Right. That's the plan… we are going to try to only be eaten a little, at the very least."

Something told him that his plan did not sound too encouraging to the Irregulars.

He coughed.

"Also, I have it on good authority that we will have to get the hell out of the tunnel as soon as the thing trapping us inside is found and destroyed. So, we will split into two teams. One team will go down, the other will remain with the convoy and make sure that all vehicles get to the surface."

The Irregulars looked at each other, trying to guess who will be assigned to which team. Luster was their best pilot, so he would have to remain with the Rhino… Samara's Aspect was less useful in narrow spaces, so there was no point in taking her deeper underground, either. The rest of them… that was the question.

Quentin looked into the darkness, and then asked calmly:

"So who is going to accept the invitation, Captain?"

Sunny glanced at him with a dour face.

"Ah, that's easy. I am going to take a look underground, while all of you will stay with the convoy."

The members of his cohort immediately protested.

"It's too dangerous to go alone!"

"Captain! Someone has to watch your back!"

"Please reconsider!"

Sunny listened to them for a while, then waved a hand.

"Shut up, you idiots! Do I look like a hero to you? If I could take you with me, I would. Hell, I'd take a whole army. However, none of you can traverse the distance fast enough to return to the convoy in time. I can, though."

He sighed, remembering one of the recruits he had decided to pass on. The guy who could create rifts in space… that Aspect would have come really handy right now. However, there was no time to regret past choices. He was very happy with his cohort, too.

"Plus, I am not going alone. I am taking Saint with me. What, did you think that I'd risk my hide if she wasn't close enough to save it?"

The Irregulars grumbled for a bit, but eventually accepted his decision. Captain's Echo was truly powerful… if a Master and an Ascended Demon couldn't handle the source of the unnatural darkness, then the members of the cohort would not be of much use

there, anyway.

They were not an ordinary Master and an average Echo, either.

Sunny gave a few more orders, making sure that the convoy would be fine in his absence, then called Saint and returned to the mouth of the side passage.

The two of them faced the darkness, remained still for a while, and then silently dove into its cold embrace.

'Damnation...'

Chapter-939: In the Belly of the Beast

The side passage was full of impenetrable darkness, too, flowing around Sunny as it turned him blind and deaf. The blade of the Cruel Sight was shining with a soft radiance, creating a small circle of light around him. That light seemed to be struggling against the tide of chilling blackness, making it appear more absolute.

The walls of the passage were much closer to each other than that of the main tunnel, its roof lower, and the circle of light was even narrower still. All of that made Sunny feel extremely claustrophobic. He walked forward with a resentful expression on his face, feeling the floor slope downward beneath his feet.

If there was one thing that reassured them, it was the silent silhouette of Saint, who was by his side. The taciturn demon moved with her usual indifference, wielding the Sin of Solace in her hands.

Together, they descended deeper into the belly of the mountain.

'Curse it… damn it… this is such crap…'

Sunny was, unsurprisingly, very nervous.

There were a lot of things for him to be nervous about. Not only was he willingly walking into a trap of an unknown, but immensely powerful Nightmare Creature, he was also surrounded by true darkness — the element that directly countered most of his abilities.

Not only that, but he also found himself in a strange situation. Most Awakened possessed at least one luminous Memory — those were usually both cheap and easy to get, so everyone had some sort of enchanted item to serve as a lantern in their arsenal. However, Sunny had never needed one, so he only had the Cruel Sight.

Its [Light Eater] enchantment allowed the somber spear to absorb light, and then expel it. After months spent in the darkness of the polar night, most of the sunlight that it had devoured in the past was long gone. What little remained was supposed to last him a few hours… but what if he failed to complete his mission by then?

Sunny brought several chemical flares with him, just in case, but he really hoped to not get a chance to use them.

Additionally, he had to leave one of his shadows with the convoy. Surrounded by true darkness, he could not turn into one to swiftly travel across the network of tunnels, but he could still Shadow Step back to one of his invaluable helpers. That was why Sunny had ventured into the depths of the mountain alone, hoping to escape whatever disaster waited ahead in an instant.

So… a quarter of his power was gone, as well.

Right now, gloomy shadow was with Saint, creepy shadow was augmenting the Cruel Sight, and the haughty one was wrapped around his body. The five of them were a fearsome quintet… nevertheless, Sunny did not feel confident.

The odds were just stacked against him too much.

'Whatever… what's the big deal, anyway? It's just a creepy, inescapable mountain full of true elemental darkness. Which apparently has a heart. A piece of cake…'

Saint turned her head a little and stared at him, the ruby jewels of her eyes glowing with cold crimson light. It was only then that Sunny noticed that his teeth were chattering.

He forced out a weak smile.

"What? It's… really cold here, you know…"

Indeed, it was. Steam escaped from his lips, and his voice echoed off the stone walls, traveling far into the narrow passage. Sunny grew quiet, not wishing to announce his position to anything that might have been hiding in the darkness.

They continued to descend, soon arriving at an intersection, which was drowning in darkness It was the first one of many — just as Professor Obel had said, there was a whole network of tunnels excavated during the Dark Times here, meant to serve as a bomb shelter in case of an all-out war.

The tunnels cut deep into the mountain, creating a strange labyrinth. Sunny was sure that there was some logic to how they were arranged, but the intent of the engineers that had built this place escaped him. If anything, the system of passages and chambers cut roughly in the stone seemed random and disorderly.

Almost… organic.

And, of course, each was consumed by darkness. At this depth, Sunny started to feel as though the darkness was moving around him, flowing through the tunnels, like blood rushing through colossal veins.

He shivered.

'Calm down, damn it…'

Find the heart, and destroy it.

...What if it was not a metaphorical heart, but a quite literal one?

Gritting his teeth, Sunny continued forward. Faced with the complicated maze of passages, he navigated through it following a simple principle — each time they arrived at an intersection, he chose the path that led further down. For now, this method seemed to be working, since the surrounding darkness seemed to have become thicker, and flowed faster.

…After a while, he started to hear a strange hum. Low and distant like a quiet whisper, it reverberated through the cold stone, echoing and growing more persistent as Sunny ventured deeper into the network of tunnels.

Struggling against a sense of vast, primordial fear, he glanced at Saint, and then stubbornly continued walking.

Soon, Sunny arrived at a dead end… or rather, what should have been a dead end. The tunnel he was following came to an abrupt stop, but the wall in front of him had collapsed… or had been shattered… at some point in the past, revealing an entrance to something that looked like a natural cave.

He hesitated for a few moments, then climbed over the pile of rubble and entered the cave. It stretched forward, twisting and turning, growing so narrow that Saint had to fall back and now walked behind him.

The dark passages had changed from those cut through the stone by human tools to being rough and uneven. The floor rose and fell, too, making moving forward hard. If Sunny had felt as though he was in a maze before, now, he had completely lost his sense of direction. All he knew was that he was still moving down, and that the darkness was flowing past him with increasing speed.

The unclear hum was growing louder and louder.

By then, Sunny had been completely overcome by an irrational feeling that he was not traveling through a network of caves, but instead crawling through the veins of a bizarre, colossal, terrifying creature.

'If… if it really is alive… then I don't want to know what kind of creature it is...'

Just as that thought flashed through Sunny's mind…

The radiance of the Cruel Sight's blade suddenly flickered, and was instantly extinguished.

All that was left was utter darkness.

Chapter-940: Heart of Darkness

'I… damned… knew that this would happen!'

There was a scratching sound in the utter darkness, and then, a stream of bright scarlet flame shot out of a chemical flare. Raising it above his head, Sunny looked at the narrow cave, which was now flooded with dim, ominous red light. The darkness retreated, for now, but it seemed ready to pounce on him at any moment.

Feeling his heart beating wildly, he glanced at Saint, who still stood behind him, unfazed. Turning away, Sunny grumbled:

'Well… what did I expect… she was born in the Underworld, of all places. I bet Saint is feeling right at home in this misbegotten darkness…'

He remained motionless for a few moments, getting accustomed to the blood-red gloom that surrounded him. Then, Sunny bit his lip and took a step forward.

"Let's go. We still need to find the heart."

The Cruel Sight was not supposed to burn through its reserve of absorbed light so soon. The chemical flare, which was supposed to burn for at least fifteen minutes, stuttered and drowned in just five, forcing him to ignite a new one. It was as though keeping true darkness at bay exhausted any source of light faster than it should have been possible…

And the deeper into the mountain they went, the more pronounced that discrepancy became.

'Curse it all…'

Sunny had dreaded reaching the heart of darkness, but now that he

was literally burning through his flares at a concerning speed, he couldn't wait to find it.

Sadly, it turned out to be harder than he had thought.

The human-made tunnels above had an obvious direction, but the chaotic network of caves was both harder to traverse and all over the place. Sometimes, he would follow a path downward, only to end up climbing for a while. Other times, descending deeper into the mountain only made the distant hum grow quieter, which told him that he was getting further from his goal.

In the end, Sunny abandoned all pretense of knowing what he was doing and chose where to go randomly, relying on his intuition to show him the way.

Soon, he discovered a new pattern.

The passages where the darkness seemed to flow faster were the ones that felt correct to him. Armed with that knowledge, he hurried forward, knowing that there was not much time left.

Time had lost all meaning, and Sunny only measured it by the amount of flares he had burned through. When there were only two of them left…

He finally reached his destination.

The walls of the narrow passage he was following suddenly disappeared, and he found himself in a vast, spherical cave. In the dim red light, he could see dozens of similar dark holes opening into it, each leading to a different natural tunnel.

…However, Sunny did not pay them any attention.

All he could look at was a giant orb of jet-black stone that floated in the center of the cave, burning darkly with the crimson reflections of the flare's fire. The darkness… the darkness flowed through it, or maybe was born from it. The hum he had heard came from the orb, like a rustle of waves that were imprisoned within it. Suddenly, he felt a terrible chill spread through his body.

Whatever that black sphere was… he knew that it was not something any human was supposed to see.

'Cut… run…'

Sunny gulped.

He couldn't believe that no one was guarding that thing. Then again, there was nothing guarding his own heart, either… if something managed to crawl into his chest, it would find his rib cage empty of defenders, as well.

...Maybe not, if Blood Weave had to say anything about it.

Sunny stretched his senses outward, checking if his connection with the fourth shadow still remained. It was there, albeit strangely muddled. Nevertheless, he knew that he would be able to use Shadow Step to get the hell out of the dark cave after destroying the Heart of Darkness.

'No time to waste, then…'

His second to last flare was about to burn out.

Stepping forward, Sunny chased all hesitation away from his mind and thrust the blade of the Cruel Sight forward. It struck the side of the black orb… and slid off its surface without leaving a scratch.

Sunny froze.

The sound of the spear hitting polished stone seemed deafening, and when it died down... was it just him, or did the hum coming from the sphere grow a little louder?

Glancing at Saint, he felt cold sweat rolling down his face and whispered:

"Help me with it, will you?"

The taciturn knight remained motionless for a moment, staring at the sphere with a hint of subdued emotion. Then, her eyes suddenly flared, the flames inside them turning darker.

Saint did something strange.

She took a step forward and handed him the Sin of Solace.

Confused, Sunny grabbed the hilt of the jade jian, feeling the infuriating whispers assault his mind.

"Pathetic."

He frowned, surprised at the sudden thought.

…Was it a thought?

At that moment, Saint took another step forward and unsheathed her broken stone sword. The jagged line of its shattered blade flashed through the darkness…

And sunk into the black surface of the sphere to the hilt.

A small crack snaked its way up and down through the surface of the orb. Suddenly, the hum became almost deafening.

'What...'

Then, the giant orb suddenly burst open, releasing a tide of darkness that washed over Sunny and Saint, throwing him back.

He fell on the cold stone, feeling something rustling against the steel of the Undying Chain. The flare was swiftly extinguished.

In the last split second that it burned, Sunny saw what the darkness released from the sphere was, and understood what the hum he had heard represented.

It was not the rustle of the waves.

…Instead, it was the rustle of countless tiny feet scraping against the shell of the black sphere from within.

The flood of darkness that had escaped from the cracked orb was actually myriads of tiny beetle-like creatures that were now swarming over him like a river, already shredding the Transcendent

metal of his armor.

Worse still, the tide of them was still flowing out of the broken sphere, rushing into the dozens of passages leading out of the cave like a flood. The sight of it was both terrifying and bizarre… no matter how large the shell of black stone had been, the mass of beetles it released — and was continuing to disgorge — was many times larger than what could possibly fit inside.

At this rate, the whole mountain was going to be filled with them in mere minutes.

'Ah… so that's why she told me to run…'

Feeling a sharp pain suddenly pierce his side, Sunny belatedly realized a dreadful fact.

He needed to enter a shadow to use Shadow Step.

…And with all light gone, there were no shadows left in the true darkness of the flooded cave.

Chapter-941: Time to Run

Sunny was buried under a moving carpet of dark beetles. His armor was being chewed through, and a few of them had already gotten inside somehow, their razor-sharp mandibles sinking into his flesh.

'C—crap…'

For a moment, his thoughts were scattered, but the sudden pulse of pain cleared them. Blinded, Sunny shuddered and tried to move his hand to cover the eye slits of his helmet's featureless mask…

It was too late.

One of the insects had already crawled through. Since Sunny could not see anything, he only realized it when something cold and slithering brushed against his nose. He instantly closed his eyes, and a split second later, a sharp pain pierced his face as one of his cheeks was torn open.

A repulsed hiss escaped through Sunny's lips.

Jerking his head, he felt the beetle fall down, and then caught it with his mouth, crushing the bastard between his teeth. It felt like chewing on steel, but the resilient shell broke with an appalling crunch, filling his mouth with sharp fragments and an indescribably bitter taste.

'Argh!'

Finally, he managed to free his hand from underneath the mass of beetles and covered the eye slits with it, then struggled to stand up. Sunny managed to rise to his knees, but at that moment, a new wave of beetles smashed into his chest, throwing him back down.

It felt as though he was drowning.

A crushing weight of the endless river of creatures pressed him down, making it hard to breathe. With each second, there were more and more of them, and the weight grew more unbearable…

In the dark cave, the seething darkness that consisted of countless myriads of tiny insects was rising like a tidal wave, already flooding most of the tunnels. The uninterrupted surface of wriggling black insects was slowly crawling higher and higher, the shards of the broken sphere already disappearing beneath them. The rustling hum of tiny feet scraping against stone turned into a rumbling roar.

…Then, a hand in an armored gauntlet broke through the surface, the chemical flare grasped by it igniting with intense scarlet flame.

Growling, Sunny pushed himself through the squirming mass of dark beetles and managed to rise to his feet with a stagger. Even standing, he was waist-deep in the rushing river of the black shells. As several of them continued to bite into his flesh, he briefly looked around.

It took him a split second to take in the sight of the underground cave, which was painted crimson by his last flare and swiftly drowning in the tide of darkness.

He had already dismissed Saint, so now, all that was left for him… was to run.

'Damned bugs… why did it have to be bugs...'

The flare in his hand stuttered, the stream of red flame it was spewing rapidly growing shorter.

But before it died, he already dove into the shadows, disappearing from view.

The fluttering flare fell into the mass of dark beetles, and was instantly swallowed by it, the last hint of light disappearing from the hidden cave... perhaps forever.

***

Back in the main tunnel, the convoy was nervously waiting for something to change. Everyone was already loaded into the vehicles,

and waiting for the Captain to return. Minute passed after minute, with no news of him. The ever-present darkness remained the same.

Inside the Rhino, Luster was sitting quietly in the pilot's seat. Professor Obel and Beth were in the lounge area, discussing something among themselves. The young woman glanced at her communicator, then took a medicine pack from her bag…

At that moment, something fell from under the roof, and a familiar figure crashed into the floor, shattering one of the robust alloy chairs in the clangor of metal. All they saw was the battered surface of the bleak armor and a mess of limbs...

Rolling over his shoulder and jumping to his feet, Sunny wasted a second to catch his balance, and then jerked his head sideways to look at Luster.

"...What the hell are you waiting for?! Drive! Go as fast as you can! Now!"

In the next moment, the whole mountain shuddered, and streams of dust fell from the tunnel's roof. Luster's eyes widened, and he sent the APC forward without asking a single question.

If the Captain was shouting, things were seriously, seriously bad.

Beth and Professor Obel both rose, startled by Sunny's sudden arrival.

"What…"

He threw a hand in their direction.

"Stop! Don't get closer!"

As the Rhino rolled into the darkness, swiftly accelerating, the rest of the vehicles promptly followed. Inside the APC, the Undying Chain disappeared into a rain of sparks, leaving Sunny half-naked.

His pale body was covered with small, ugly lacerations, but there was almost no blood in sight.

Several tiny black insects fell to the floor, and were promptly and

viciously stomped to death by him. Nevertheless, even after disposing of the beetles, Sunny did not look relieved.

Instead, he paled even more, and then bent over, vomiting a mouthful of dark blood.

Beth took a step forward, looking around in search of a medkit with a worried expression on her face.

"What is going on?"

Sunny bared his teeth in a growl.

"I said stay back!"

With that, a strange stiletto appeared in his hand. Its blade was long, narrow, and seemed to be forged out of ghostly glass.

Without hesitating even for a second, Sunny sent both the young woman and the old man into a momentary shock by turning the stiletto against himself… and plunging it into his chest.

"Hey! What are you..."

A startled yelp escaped from Beth's mouth, drowning Sunny's own groan.

'Ah… damn it!'

He twisted the Moonlight Shard in the wound, causing an ugly grimace to appear on his face, and then pulled the stiletto out.

Impaled on it was the body of a strange beetle with a jet-black carapace, its shell broken, crushed, and smeared with blood.

The tiny creature had almost reached his heart. A few moments later… and Sunny would have been in a sea of trouble.

He stared at the dead insect for a few moments, and then shivered. The mountain quaked again, and a net of cracks appeared on the roof of the tunnel just ahead.

Sunny looked through the windshield of the speeding APC and inhaled deeply, not paying attention to the pain.

'Time to run…'

Chapter-942: Tide of Darkness

'Ah… it hurts…'

Sunny had escaped the dark cave fast enough to not be eaten alive, or even to a serious degree. Just as he had joked, he ended up only being eaten a little.

There were a few bites on his body and one on his cheek. The most serious wound by far was the one he had inflicted on himself to get the last beetle from under his skin. The Moonlight Shard had cut deep, but, guided by his steady hand, missed both his heart and anything else that was important.

Still, it stung. Not that Sunny had time to pay it any attention.

The Rhino was speeding forward, almost flying through the shuddering tunnel. All around it, the darkness was rippling and shifting, as if out of control. It felt like the thing they were inside of — whatever it might have been — was convulsing. Not exactly in the throes of death, but maybe in agony.

Sunny was pretty sure that the blow Saint had delivered to the black sphere was not fatal to the unknown being, since he never heard the Spell announcing a kill. The source of the true darkness was not destroyed, just damaged.

…Or maybe set free.

"Captain! That… that is new!"

Hearing Luster call out to him, Sunny looked forward and saw an unfamiliar shape appear from the darkness. It was a rusted frame of an old personal vehicle, which they had never seen before. The implication made a pale smile appear on his face.

'It's broken…'

The strange anomaly that had been keeping them inside the tunnel seemed to be no more. They were actually moving forward instead of traveling endlessly through a never-ending sea of darkness.

Destroying the black sphere had really broken the binding.

He let out a shaky breath.

If he had not received a message from the outside… things might have turned out differently. Sunny would have ventured into the side passages eventually, but probably without leaving one of the shadows behind. Even if he did, he would have definitely taken the rest of the Irregulars with him.

Then, they would have died.

Actually, he still struggled to believe that everyone survived.

…For now.

'We are not out of the tunnel yet.'

Suddenly cold, he looked at Luster and said:

"Top speed! Get us out of here!"

The Rhino flashed past the rusted vehicle, pushing it aside with its ram. The rest of the convoy followed, and soon, they could feel the floor of the tunnel starting to slope up. That had not happened before, so Sunny took it as a good sign.

Sadly, good things had ended after that.

The mountain seemed to be coming to life around them. It shook and trembled, more and more cracks appearing on the walls and the roof of the tunnel. At some point, one of the walls collapsed just as the last vehicle passed it, and a flood of something dark and seething flowed into the underground passage.

Sunny shuddered, realizing that it was the beetles.

The tide of them rushed into the tunnel like a river of black liquid. However, that liquid was behaving as if it possessed a maleficent sentience. Instead of spreading in every direction like water would, it seemed to deliberately rush in pursuit of the convoy.

Up ahead, a deep crack appeared on another section of the wall, and a few tiny bodies fell from it on the road.

'Crap!'

All Sunny could do was pray that they would pass the swiftly growing crack before the stone wall shattered.

Somehow, they did.

At that point, it seemed like the whole tunnel was ready to collapse. The civilian transports struggled to keep up with the Rhino, climbing up the quaking road. Behind them, the endless flood of dark beetles was gaining speed, swelling as new streams of them poured in. Dust and pieces of stone were raining from above.

…But ahead of them, in the distance, a circle of dim light appeared.

The exit.

It was still night outside, but at least there were the stars, the ghostly flames of the aurora, and maybe even the moon. Although small, the difference between the true darkness of the underground tunnel and the mundane darkness of the outside world was apparent.

They almost made it…

No, they were going to make it!

Sunny gritted his teeth as he watched the distant exit approach while the tunnel was breaking down around them.

'Just a bit more… just a little bit…'

Finally, the Rhino shot through the round opening, escaping into the chilling cold of the polar night. The vast expanse of the black sky appeared above, looking more beautiful than ever. Sunny grinned

triumphantly.

Then, his grin disappeared.

Finally able to see, he sent his shadows to take a look outside, and studied their surroundings.

The tunnel had led them quite high into the mountains. Behind them, the stone slopes were cracking and breaking, with giant boulders rolling down into deep gorges with deafening noise. Rivers of darkness were flowing out of the mountain, all twisting to take aim at the escaping convoy.

The damned beetles were continuing to pursue them even now.

In fact, the wide streams of black insects seemed more like limbs of a colossal being than swarms of tiny creatures. They stretched and slithered, looking like giant tentacles… very much like those that Sunny could create himself, but on a much, much larger scale.

He felt a sudden chill spread through his wounded chest, and belatedly summoned the Undying Chain back. Their battle might not have ended just yet.

But how could he fight something like that?

No, their only chance of survival was to run. Even Cassie had said that he had to run. So, that was what Sunny planned to do…

Luckily, the convoy appeared to be a little bit faster than the flood of darkness.

"Oh crap!"

Hearing Luster's shout, Sunny felt the Rhino come to an abrupt stop. It was so violent and sudden that he was thrown off his feet, while Beth and Professor Obel grimaced in their seats, secured in place by durable straps.

'What… what is he doing… has that bastard lost his mind?'

Before even standing up, Sunny commanded his shadows to look

away from the approaching tide of black beetles and try to see what had made Luster stop.

What they found made him utter a curse.

'Damn it all...'

Right in front of them, there was a vast canyon that seemed so deep that it might have as well been bottomless. There was a long, wide vehicle bridge connecting the two sides of the canyon.

…Sadly, the bridge had collapsed at some point in the past, maybe decades ago.

Now, all that remained of it was a piece of broken road that hung over a dark abyss, and Rhino had stopped precariously just a few meters away from the edge.

Chapter-943: No Way Forward

'Curse it…'

Sunny stared at the dark abyss of the canyon, his mind empty. A second passed in stunned silence, then another. Finally, he turned around and looked back, as though capable of gazing through the armored hull of the Rhino.

Which he was, in a way.

There, behind the heavy APC, the other vehicles of the convoy had hit the brakes, barely avoiding slamming into each other. They were crowded on the mountain road, snow dancing in the narrow beams of the headlights.

And behind the convoy, the flood of darkness was rushing forward, stretching its tentacles in their direction.

They had maybe a minute before the mass of dark beetles reached the rear vehicle.

…This time, Sunny was not going to be able to protect it.

He might manage to destroy hundreds, or even thousands of the ghastly insects, but it would be like a drop in the ocean. None of his attacks would be able to deal the titanic wave of darkness any serious harm… especially because, as Sunny suspected, the beetles were not technically alive.

Not only did he not hear the Spell announcing the kills while slaying the few that had crawled into his armor, but the mere fact that the damned creatures traveled with him through the shadows meant that they were somehow akin to inanimate objects — Sunny was only able to carry those with him through Shadow Step, after all.

What good would it do to kill a bunch of bugs that were not even alive, to begin with?

"Captain! What… what do we do?!"

Sunny glanced at Luster, then said in a hoarse voice:

"What else? Run… we have to run…"

Then, he silently disappeared into the shadows. A moment later, Sunny was standing at the edge of the broken road, looking into the bottomless abyss below. The biting cold of the polar night caressed his skin, and the strong winds instantly tried to push him down.

Behind him, the tide of black beetles was devouring the cracked surface of the road, getting closer and closer, and the mountain continued to quake, erupting with a flood of darkness.

The canyon was somewhere between one and two hundred meters wide, with steep vertical slopes that stretched far, far down. There was no secondary road to skirt its edge or descend to its bottom, only the broken bridge and the vast schism separating the convoy from the opposite side.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

There was not much time to think, so he did the first thing that came to his mind, without even stopping to consider if it was possible to pull off.

If it was impossible… he would just have to change that.

His essence surged, coursing through his veins with tremendous speed, and then flowed outward. His face paled as his eyes turned into two pools devoid of any light.

Just as the darkness disgorged by the mountain moved, the shadows covering its slopes moved, too. The deep murk drowning the deep canyon boiled, rushing upward. Two black pillars suddenly broke through the snow covering the sides of the shattered road and rose into the sky, growing taller and taller with each second.

At the same time, the tide of shadows rushing from below reached the edge of the broken bridge and bent, freezing for a moment above the bottomless canyon like a wave that was about to break.

But, instead of breaking, the shadows continued to spread forward and solidify, as if forming a dark path above the abyss.

…If there was no bridge for them to cross, Sunny would just have to build one of his own.

'Argh…'

He was expending so much essence that his soul felt as if it had come under strain. However, instead of slowing down, Sunny doubled his efforts.

On the far side of the canyon, two more pillars rose, and another surge of shadows stretched into the air, growing meter after meter to meet the first one. Long tentacles of darkness shot from the tops of the pillars, turning into unbreakable chains. From them, dozens of smaller chains fell, fusing into the black surface of the growing bridge.

Sunny was not concerned with how much essence he had, however, he was worried about the structural integrity of the hurried construct, and the speed with which he would be able to connect the two parts of it.

There was not much time left…

But there were very few people in the world who knew more about forming connections out of chains. After all, he had spent so much time in the ruined Kingdom of Hope, traveling from one island to another across the heavenly chains that bound them together.

Chained together… inseparable… and stronger for it…

There was probably some philosophical lesson to learn from it all, but Sunny was too preoccupied to care. With a groan, he stepped aside and waved to Luster, who was staring at him through the windshield of the Rhino.

"Drive!"

The young man looked at him with wide eyes, then glanced at the eerie black road that hung above the abyss, connected to nothing and only supported by dozens of swinging chains.

Then, with trembling hands, he sent the APC rolling forward. Its massive wheels soon abandoned the cracked asphalt of the broken road and touched the black surface of the shadow bridge.

The manifested path of shadows shook slightly… but held.

It bore the full weight of the Rhino, and then that of the next vehicles that drove onto it. And then, the next.

Soon, the whole convoy left the solid ground and entered the aerial road built by Sunny. He grabbed the metal handle on the hatch of the last vehicle and allowed its momentum to pull him with it, then climbed onto its roof and crashed down on the cold alloy.

After several seconds, Sunny glanced back, at the approaching wave of darkness.

It was already so close… too close.

Somewhere ahead, the Rhino almost reached the end of the growing road of shadows. The APC was moving faster than Sunny was capable of making the bridge manifest itself, but luckily, the second part of the path was already close.

The two sides of the black bridge connected and fused with each other just a few seconds before the massive Rhino rolled over the invisible seam and continued to speed forward without pause.

Soon after that, Luster let out a shaky breath as the wheels of the Rhino touched solid ground on the other side of the canyon.

Sunny was feeling like he was on the verge of fainting, but forced himself to remain absolutely focused. Behind him, the myriads of dark beetles were already crawling across the shadow bridge. The wave of them were almost halfway across, putting so much pressure on the chains that a few of them were on ready to snap.

'Bastards…'

It was at that moment that the vehicle he was riding on shuddered as it passed between two tall black columns.

Looking back, Sunny grinned.

'...this is a toll bridge. Pay up or die.'

…On second thought, just die.

With a quiet groan, he released the mass of shadows that had followed his will, allowing them to return to their natural immaterial form. A sense of profound relief almost sent him stumbling off the roof of the moving vehicle.

The shadow bridge suddenly turned ghostly, collapsing into shapelessness, and then dissipated into the night. Myriads of dark beetles plummeted down, and even more of them continued to flow from the slopes of the battered mountain, plunging into the abyss of the canyon like waterfalls of pure darkness.

But the convoy was safe.

It continued moving forward, putting more and more distance between itself and whatever it was that had dwelled in the network of old tunnels.

Sunny let out a heavy sigh, and then sprawled listlessly on the roof of the military vehicle, looking at the distant tapestry of cold stars.

'...No more tunnels. Damned ever. I… I hope.'

Chapter-944: Safe and Relatively Sound

After the ominous mountain disappeared from view, hidden by the snowy slopes and darkness… the mundane darkness of the polar night, not the unfathomable true darkness that they had just barely escaped from… the convoy finally came to a stop.

Around them was the familiar landscape of the Antarctic Center. Deep in the mountains, they were temporarily protected from the wind by an overhanging cliff, and had reached a wide area that was somewhat fit to serve as a campsite. The vehicles needed to be checked after the recent mad dash, and the people needed time to come to their senses.

Plus, they had no idea where they were. Sunny had to scout the area, determine their location on the map, and come up with a route forward. He also needed to make sure that there were no swarms of Nightmare Creatures close by or heading in their direction, and do a thousand other things.

'Ah… I don't want to…'

Creating a bridge of shadows had cost him a lot of essence, but the mental strain had been far worse. Sunny felt tired and lazy, but he had no choice except to get busy right away. Rolling off the roof of the military vehicle, he landed on the snow, sighed, and sent his shadows to explore.

By then, the members of his cohort and other people had already emerged from their transports. Some went about establishing a camp and searching for good watch posts, while some headed toward him with complicated faces.

Pretty soon, he was surrounded by the Irregulars. A few of them

looked relieved to find him safe and relatively sound, others were mostly full of questions. Luster, who had witnessed more than the rest, was the first one to speak:

"Captain, sir! That… that was something else."

Sunny simply nodded, in agreement with the young man, for a change.

Luster hesitated for a few moments, then asked cautiously:

"But, uh… what was it, exactly?"

He stared at Sunny, and added in a suddenly hoarse voice:

"I don't mean that amazing bridge you made, I mean the… the other thing. The one that almost gobbled us up."

Sunny did not answer for a while. Eventually, he shook his head and looked south with a dark expression.

"I don't know."

He had a few ideas, though.

The being that had dwelled in the old tunnels was too vast and powerful to be a simple Nightmare Creature. It reminded him a lot of the Crimson Terror of the Forgotten Shore… so, perhaps, it was also a terror, one that had gone into a slumber to evolve into a titan. Or maybe a titan that was in the process of evolving to a higher Rank.

Or maybe it was a creature that had entered the process of evolution, only to be devoured from the inside by a different, more insidious abomination.

…In any case, Sunny was certain that he and Saint had messed the whole process up, somehow, and even lived to tell the tale.

Speaking of Saint… he wondered if she was alright. The damned beetles had not seriously wounded him, but she had been standing much closer to the eerie black sphere — whether it was a heart, a harrowing egg, or a chrysalis — when it burst open. Sunny had not

seen his Shadow since.

He was also curious why her broken stone sword had managed to harm the sphere when the Cruel Sight failed.

Sunny knew that Saint was not destroyed, since he had felt her return back into his lightless soul after being dismissed, but she might have sustained severe damage.

Sunny gave several orders to the Irregulars, checked on Professor Obel, and then found a quiet place to find out. Somewhat nervous, he summoned Saint… but nothing happened.

'Damnation! Just as I thou… huh?'

Something wasn't right. The taciturn demon's absence felt different from how it usually was when wounded Shadows slept in the nurturing black flames, repairing themselves.

He almost couldn't feel her at all.

Concerned, Sunny dove into the Soul Sea, stared at the four dark suns of his shadow cores for a few moments, and then summoned the runes.

Shadows: [Marble Saint], [Soul Serpent], [Nightmare].

The runes describing the Serpent were lifeless, indicating that it was outside his control. Saint's, however, appeared normal. He concentrated on her name and read:

Shadow: Marble Saint.

Shadow Rank: Ascended.

Shadow Class: Demon…

Everything looked normal. However, at the very end of the field of shimmering runes, a new string of them appeared.

Sunny's heart skipped a beat.

[...Marble Saint is evolving.]

'...What!'

He remained motionless for a while, then sighed.

'So that's how it is…'

Leaving the Soul Sea, Sunny looked up, breathed in the cold air of the polar night, and smiled crookedly.

He was both happy and despondent.

Saint had risen to a higher Class once before, after slaying the Forsaken Knight. Back then, she had ripped a strange dark jewel from his chest, and ate it. Then, his Shadow — who had been an Awakened Monster at the time — disappeared back into his soul to enter the process of evolution.

Saint must have gotten something from the dark sphere, as well.

Sunny was elated to know that she was evolving once again, wondering what form his shadow knight would assume, and what powers she would gain. However, he also remembered that, last time, her evolution to a higher Class had lasted for more than a month, robbing him of her support throughout the civil war in the Bright Castle.

This time, too, he would be left without his strongest aide for a while.

Saint must have known that, too, so this time, she did not return into his soul core of her own free will, instead choosing to remain in the waking world to assist him. However, Sunny had dismissed her himself, not knowing what that would entail.

He sighed.

"Well… there was no other choice, anyway. That was the only way to get her safely back to the convoy."

And now, the safety of the convoy was laying squarely on his shoulders, and his alone.

'Rest well, Saint. You deserved it.'

When she returned, her powers would undoubtedly be much greater. Sunny was going to need every bit of that power to survive the rest of the Antarctica campaign, but for now…

For now, he would have to lead the convoy the rest of the way to Erebus Field without his faithful Shadow.

'I better get busy, then. It wouldn't do to have Saint return only to see that we are still stuck somewhere in the mountains… no, not at all. We're both going to be Ascended Devils, so I'll have to work hard to… you know… not be overshadowed by my own Shadow!'

He looked down and let out a bitter sigh.

'Again…'

Chapter-945: The Road Ahead

Somehow, almost everyone in the convoy was still alive. Looking at it from the roof of the Rhino, Sunny felt both burdened and surprised. He had not really expected to get this far into the mountains without suffering severe casualties.

Was he supposed to feel proud of himself?

'...Let's try to keep it this way, then.'

By now, his shadows had already climbed the nearest peaks, allowing him to observe the surrounding area. The tunnel they had escaped from might not have been endless, but as it turned out, it was actually quite long. More than that, it cut straight through the mountains instead of meandering its way around the gorges and canyons.

As a result, and due to the previous days of travel, the convoy had managed to cover a lot of ground and was more than a third of the way to Erebus Field.

Sadly, the good news ended there.

'That... is troubling.'

Sunny glanced at the screen of his communicator, then climbed back into the interior of the APC and opened the map of the Antarctic Center as a projection in the command suite.

They had reached the edges of the section that he had marked back in the abandoned bunker. From here onward, all Sunny had to go on was the stock map, which was not very detailed, and outdated on top of that. The battle between the Saints and the Titans had changed the topography of the entire region, and there were the effects of the Chain of Nightmares itself to consider, too.

Of course, he could always repeat the process and update the map with the help of his shadows again. Which was exactly what he had been planning to do…

And why his mood was currently so foul.

With a sigh, Sunny started to put new marks on the projection. Soon, the position of the convoy was surrounded by a sea of red lines and symbols that stretched far to the north, with barely any green in between.

'Damnation.'

The path ahead… was going to be rough, to say the least. They must have been relatively close to the place where the three Saints of the First Evacuation Army had battled the Winter Beast, the Goliath, and the Whispering Legion, eliminating the latter Titan. The resulting earthquake had destroyed a good chunk of the mountain range and made a mess of the surrounding area.

Sunny was trying to come up with a way to get the convoy through that mess, but it seemed all but impossible.

Most of the roads were destroyed, and those that remained were buried under heavy debris. Avalanches, landslides, and rockfalls were everywhere, reshaping the landscape. The damage was much worse here than Sunny had expected.

And there were Nightmare Creatures, of course. The whole area was seething with them, and he had already spotted at least two dozen active Gates, with more probably hidden from view by the overturned terrain.

Sunny was not sure if the Rhino would be able to make it through, let alone the civilian vehicles. No matter how hard he tried to find a safe route, there seemed to be none to be found.

His mood turned dark.

After a while, Sunny decided to get a fresh pair of eyes to take a look at the map, or better yet, several. He ordered the Irregulars to gather in the APC, and invited Sergeant Gere as well.

Professor Obel was already there, so Sunny simply asked the old man to join him in the command suite.

Soon, everyone arrived, and an improvised strategy meeting started. The result was about as disturbing as Sunny had expected. No one seemed to have a good idea on how to proceed.

Dorn was currently pointing at a certain point of the map:

"... if we can use our Echoes to lead the Nightmare Creatures deeper into the gorge, we might be able to drive past this Gate without being swarmed by enemies. From there, we can follow the auxiliary road to the pass and get some breathing room."

Samara shook her head.

"Even if we manage to avoid the Nightmare Creatures, you are overestimating the civilian transports. Most of them won't make it on this extremely rough terrain. We are already struggling to keep them from falling apart, and this whole stretch of the mountains is basically a high intensity obstacle course."

She sighed, then looked at Sunny with a somber expression.

"There is one more thing everyone is forgetting about, too. Fuel cells. They are not exhausted yet, but going through a gauntlet like that will put them under strain, which I don't think we can afford. Driving through the mountains is one thing… driving through this disaster zone is another."

Sunny frowned, then glanced at Sergeant Gere.

"Can't we improvise something to charge the transports up?"

The soldier hesitated for a few moments. Eventually, he sighed.

"We can cannibalize the military vehicles, if need be. The power systems are not exactly compatible, but with the help of Awakened Kim and Samara, some sort of converter can be rigged. The soldiers can join the refugees inside the transports… but, apart from the obvious loss of defensive capability, there are other factors against that solution.

We are not too high on energy reserves ourselves, and the transports are much more power-hungry. So it won't be a drastic change… maybe a difference of another hundred kilometers or so, in this cold."

Sunny let out a heavy sigh, thinking of other solutions.

There were all kinds of wild ideas in his head, like hitching one of the transports to Nightmare and letting the black steed pull it like a mundane drudge. The Rhino could manage one, too.

…Hell, with a proper harness, Sunny would probably be able to pull one of the transports himself. That would be a sight to behold!

He grimaced.

'Join the army, she said. You will earn lots of contribution points, she said! Curse it all...'

Was that why he had become an officer? To be strapped into a damned yoke and pull a wagon like a glorified ox?

The idea was ridiculous, anyway. Sure, it was theoretically possible to pull the civilian transports in case they lost power, but what about heating? What about light? How would the civilians survive hundreds of kilometers of traveling through the mountains, in the middle of a polar night, without those things?

At that moment, Luster suddenly spoke:

"There is an option that we are all overlooking, isn't there? One that is not only viable, as far as terrain is concerned, but will also get us to Erebus Field within a day."

The others looked at him with confusion, while Sunny's face darkened.

The young man smiled sheepishly, then added:

"I mean, I know that it's risky… but it's right under our noses."

With that, he pointed at the map. There, at the very edge of the mountains, a thick red line was stretching far north.

The coastal highway.

Chapter-946: Scenic Route

The coastal highway… that damned thing.

Sunny was, of course, aware that traveling by means of the highway was an option. An incredible option, even, considering that the highway was wide, flat, kept in good condition, and stretched most of the way to the very northern edge of the Antarctic Center as it skirted the whole landmass between the mountains and the ocean.

But that was exactly the problem with it. Built along the coast, it was both awfully close to the water and utterly exposed. Here in the mountains, they were hidden from most of the prowling Nightmare Creatures by the terrain, and could use it to their advantage.

Out there on the coast, nothing would be protecting them from the hordes of abominations, both those on land and those hiding beneath the waves.

Sergeant Gere and the other survivors of the initial, much larger convoy could attest to the horrors of the coastal highway. They had barely escaped it once, losing most of the transports and every member of their Awakened escort in the process.

Indeed, the soldier looked incredibly tense at Luster's suggestion.

"With all due respect, you don't know what you are talking about. That place… it's a death trap. A handful of us managed to survive a shorter journey across the highway than what you are proposing, and even that was by some miracle."

Luster scratched the back of his head.

"Yeah, but your situation back then was different."

Gere frowned.

"How so?"

The young man looked at him with surprise.

"I mean, isn't it obvious? You didn't have the Captain with you!"

'...What?'

Sunny stared at Luster for a few moments, dumbfounded. Did the fool finally lose his mind?

However, Sergeant Gere reaction to the ridiculous response was out of his expectation. Instead of mocking Luster, the soldier looked down and cleared his throat in embarrassment.

"Well… that is true, indeed…"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"...Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I am not a miracle worker. I am afraid of the coastal highway, too."

There was a reason for why he had chosen a much longer, much more arduous journey through the mountains, after all. Even if the highway offered a convenient path to their destination, it held a much higher risk of running into something that none of them was prepared to handle.

From hordes of Nightmare Creatures akin to the Devouring Cloud to the damned Terror that had slaughtered every living soul at LO49, to countless other horrors no one knew about.

Even running into a Titan was not out of the question. The Winter Beast was being contained somewhere in the north by Saint Tyris, but the location of the monstrosity that Army Command had designated as Goliath was currently unknown. Nothing was stopping the bastard from showing up the moment the convoy got stuck in the open.

However…

Traveling through the mountains had turned out much more dangerous than Sunny had anticipated, despite his habit of always

expecting the worst. By now, he had successfully managed to lead the convoy into pretty much every possible terrible situation that they had been supposed to avoid by not choosing the highway.

With the path ahead so close to being impassable and the civilian transports falling apart on the steep, unreliable mountain roads… the more dangerous route was starting to look more and more attractive.

Kim sighed.

"Sorry… I hate to agree with Luster… but there are about six hundred kilometers between us and Erebus Field. That is if we go straight, of course. If we have to maneuver through the mountains and circle around them in search of passable roads, fighting Nightmare Creatures as we go… I doubt that many of us will make it."

She sighed, then threw a tentative glance at Sunny.

"If we descend to the coastal highway, however, and go at full speed… we can cover these six hundred kilometers in a matter of hours. Of course, this is a huge risk, b—but… isn't it an even bigger risk to stubbornly push forward through the mountains, if it means staying in the wild for days, maybe even weeks more?"

Sunny winced.

Kim was somewhat right. The coastal highway was dangerous, but so were the mountains. They were teeming with Nightmare Creatures of all sorts, and were too hard to navigate in the wake of the earthquake.

There was also the matter of time, which no one except for Sunny — and perhaps Professor Obel — seemed to be aware of, since they were not looking at the bigger picture.

And the bigger picture, from what he could tell, was not looking too swell. The First Army was not earning any victories against the tide of abominations… instead, its position was gradually worsening. Those additional days and weeks Kim had mentioned were much more important than she knew, for more than one reason.

Sunny sighed.

…In the end, both choices were terrible. Remaining in the mountains was a bit safer, but also a bit hopeless. Trying to charge the coastal highway was much more dangerous, but also offered a much more realistic chance of salvation.

It was like rolling a die.

'...Do I feel lucky today?'

He remained silent for a long time, then deactivated the projection and looked at the people gathered in the command suite. Everyone tensed, waiting to hear his decision.

Sunny tiredly rubbed his face.

"Prepare the vehicles to go all out. I want them to be able to keep their top speed for at least six hours without ever slowing down… do everything you can. I don't care if the transports completely fall apart and explode after that, just make sure that nothing breaks down on the road. Either way, it will probably be their last ride, so… prepare well.

We will be taking the scenic route along the coast."

With that, everyone was suddenly extremely busy. Getting the convoy ready for a high-speed charge across the coastal highway was not a small task, especially considering that it was most likely going to turn into a rolling battle.

Sunny was one of the few soldiers that had nothing much to do, so he simply went outside and stared at the night sky, with a full moon staring back at him like a giant blind eye.

A few meters away from him, the lone Sleeper of the convoy was busy applying Black Venom to whatever bullets Sergeant Gere's soldiers had left. He was also doing the same to his arrows.

Suddenly curious, Sunny called out to the young man.

"Hey, you. What do you think? Will we make it?"

The Sleeper looked up at him with wide eyes. He was apparently not

expecting to be addressed by the Captain.

"Sir? Yes, sir! Without a doubt, sir!"

Sunny chuckled.

"That's the spirit… oh, right. I was meaning to ask… what is your name, anyway?"

The Sleeper stared at him blankly for a few moments, then looked down and whispered under his nose:

"Goddammit… what the hell, really?"

Sunny frowned.

"What was that?"

The Sleeper flinched.

"Oh… sorry, sir! It's just that… uh… I have already told you my name, like twenty times. It's my Flaw, sir. Everyone seems to forget!"

'Huh?'

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Well… alright. As you were, then."

'What a strange Flaw. Not the worst one to have, though...'

He left the Sleeper alone and walked forward, stopping in front of the Rhino and looking ahead. Then, he started stretching his muscles.

The road ahead was desolate and enveloped in darkness.

'This… is going to be a wild ride.'

Chapter-947: Highway to Hell

The small convoy turned west, rolling down a narrow road that descended from the mountains and eventually met the coastal highway. The Rhino was moving at the front of the column, with four remaining civilian transports following it and the three battered military vehicles guarding the rear.

This was Sunny's siege army for the next six hours or so.

The three armored vehicles at Sergeant Gere's disposal still had some ammunition left — just barely enough to last them the rest of the way to Erebus Field, provided that their charge across the highway would be as dire as Sunny anticipated.

The civilian transports were not only flimsy, but also lacked any kind of integrated defense systems to ward off the attacking Nightmare Creatures. However, they were protected by something far more lethal — the Irregulars.

Samara was already setting up her rifle in an improvised gun nest on the roof of the rearmost transport. To allow the Awakened sharpshooter complete freedom in picking off targets from distance, Quentin was by her side, his sword and shield ready to strike down any Nightmare Creature that would dare to get too close.

Kim was on the roof of the next vehicle, with a dozen magazines of charged rounds prepared in advance for her carbine. The nameless Sleeper was keeping her company with a bow and a quiver of poisoned arrows.

Belle and Dorn were protecting the last two transports. Both had Memories capable of ranged attacks, but neither was a proficient marksman. Their main job was to prevent abominations from attacking the refugees directly.

So, knowing that they would probably have to move around the roofs of their assigned vehicles a lot, the two fighters had neglected modifying the vehicles with any kinds of protective emplacements.

All four transports had been prepared for the charge as well as the soldiers could manage. There were plates of armor and alloy spikes welded to their sides, as well as makeshift rams attached to their fronts, in a pale imitation of the Rhino.

…And lastly, there was the heavy APC itself. Since Saint was gone, Sunny was sitting on its roof instead, holding Morgan's Warbow in his hands. Despite the howling of the chilling wind, he did not feel cold at all, fueled by adrenaline. His body was encompassed by the dull steel of the Undying Chain, the Dying Wish hidden beneath its sleek breastplate.

He was ready for battle.

Traverse the highway as fast as possible, killing anything before it had a chance to approach the convoy. That was the plan.

Not that Sunny really expected everything to go according to it…

Blackie and Abomination were running ahead of the column, serving as the vanguard and forward scouts, while Nightmare was still slumbering in the depths of his soul. The dark courser was already sufficiently healed to be summoned, but Sunny was holding back on calling upon him until things inevitably went south.

'Which they will… I just know they will…'

Descending the mountains was easier than trying to push through them, so it did not take long for the convoy to reach the final stretch of the road before the coastal highway. The terrain had turned much smoother, and then entirely flat. Finally, the beams of light shooting from the Rhino illuminated the wide expanse of weathered concrete… and the dark waves rising and falling not too far behind it.

The highway was wide enough for ten APCs the size of the Rhino to drive side by side, but a section of it was separated from the main thoroughfare by a thick barrier. Behind it, closest to the mountain

slopes, a railway stretched both north and south, meant to carry armored trains across the landmass. That still left them enough space to maneuver, but also placed the convoy closer to the ocean.

The full moon shone in the black sky, drowning in the undulating lights of the ghostly aurora. The highway was utterly empty and basked in the pale moonlight. All of it — the dark slopes of the mountains, the wide expanse of the road, and the black waves beyond it — looked eerie, ominous, and foreboding.

However, Sunny had no time to appreciate the ambiance.

'...That was fast.'

A few hundred meters ahead, the two Echoes had already caught the scent of Nightmare Creatures hiding in the darkness. Unfortunately for them, very few things could hide from Sunny's gaze in the gloom of the polar night…

Even before Abomination had a chance to lunge at the dark shapes laying on the road, a black arrow fell from the sky, piercing the head… at least Sunny thought that it was the head… of a monstrous centipede that seemed to have been resting on the concrete.

[You have slain an Awakened Beast…]

A moment later, the Echo's powerful jaws crunched on the chitinous carapace of a different abomination, while Blackie jumped on the third, trying to copy the ferocious attack of the larger hound. A second arrow helped him finish the job.

Without slowing down, the Rhino plowed through the corpses of the massive centipedes, tearing them apart and clearing the way for the rest of the convoy.

Sunny felt the APC vibrating as it gradually gained more and more speed. The coastal highway seemed to be in good shape despite the recent earthquake, so nothing was slowing them down. For now, at least, it seemed as though they had a chance of making it to Erebus Field in a timely fashion.

However, he could already see more Nightmare Creatures in the

distance, their frenzied eyes slowly igniting with dangerous flames as the lights and the noise of the convoy attracted their attention.

There were unclear shapes moving on the slopes of the mountains, too, rising from the darkness and starting to descend toward the highway to intercept the column of human vehicles.

…Much more disturbingly, the black waves continued to murmur to the speeding convoy's left as they continuously assaulted the shore, coming and going without showing any sign of a harrowing threat hiding beneath their dark surface.

That lack of movement filled Sunny with much more unease than the swiftly approaching silhouettes of murderous abominations.

'Whatever it is that is going to show up… just show up already.'

There was no response.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny turned away from the ocean and raised his bow.

Chapter-948: Dire Marathon

There were all kinds of Nightmare Creatures who had apparently decided to take a nap on the flat concrete surface of the coastal highway.

Bestial maws opened in vicious snarls, sharp mandibles dripping with viscous saliva, jagged claws, curving bone scythes, and various implements of death that Sunny did not even know how to describe… all of it was flying toward the convoy, drawing closer and closer with each second.

The faster the vehicles moved, the faster the abominations converged on them.

'Damnation…'

Sunny was standing on the vibrating roof of the Rhino, drawing Morgan's Warbow time and time again. In a short span of time, he had let loose a veritable rain of arrows, slaughtering at least a dozen of the approaching Nightmare Creatures.

His muscles were already protesting the unforgiving pace, but augmented with all four of his shadows, Sunny knew that he could keep the same rate of fire for much longer.

The battle was only starting, anyway. Although the menagerie of monsters rushing toward the convoy seemed ghastly and dangerous, these were only the dregs of the Chain of Nightmares. They were the lone stragglers or small packs of abominations that had broken away from larger swarms and hordes, and as such, did not pose a real threat.

For now, they were also only attacking the column from the front. Very soon, Sunny and his people would be surrounded and forced to resist attacks from all directions.

To postpone that, Samara finally opened fire. Most of the Nightmare Creatures on the highway were obscured from her by the other transports and the wide shape of the Rhino, but she had a clear shot of the mountains slopes and the abominations that were rushing down the treacherous surface of the icy stone to attack the convoy from the side.

A shining slug flashed through the air, and one of the distant silhouettes ruptured, mangled remains sliding down the steep slope. Even before the echo of the first thunderous shot dissipated into the cold air, the powerful rifle was already humming with electrical whine once again, charging to spit another devastating round.

'I am not fast enough to kill all of them…'

For now, Sunny was conserving his essence. He was only using one of the active enchantments of his mighty bow, [Soul Arrows], which did not demand a lot of it. The Dying Wish was also inactive, for now, since there was no need to draw the attention of abominations away from the civilian transports yet.

He considered summoning the Strike of Thunder for a moment, then decided against it. Their charge toward Erebus Field was going to be a marathon, not a sprint. They had to be frugal with how to spend their power and resources…

Instead of laying waste to the approaching Nightmare Creatures with a strike of lightning, he picked the most threatening ones and concentrated on taking down these high-priority targets first. Abomination fearlessly dove into the mass of enemies, tearing them apart with ruthless determination.

Since there were very few Fallen creatures among this first wave, most were much weaker than the massive Echo.

Blackie, however, was in danger of being slain if he was not careful. The smaller hound separated and dashed to the edge of the highway, concentrating on attacking the outliers of the rushing mob.

'So far so good…'

Sunny killed most of the Nightmare Creatures that could seriously threaten the Rhino, but at that point, the APC was already only meters away from the swiftest of the attackers.

Moving at its top speed, the enormous bulk of the Rhino smashed into the lunging abomination, practically pulverizing it into a cloud of crimson haze. The second creature crashed on the concrete with an arrow in its eye, and then, the convoy was in the thick of the disorganized crowd of Nightmare Creatures.

Some of them were quick enough to change direction and dash toward the civilian transports, the others were too slow and allowed the column to flash past, then wasted precious seconds to stop, turn around, and hurry to pursue the speeding vehicles.

The turrets of the military vehicles barked, sending poisoned bullets toward those abominations that were fast enough to catch up with them, and ignoring the rest. It was not their goal, nor was it realistic, to slaughter every single Nightmare Creature across six hundred kilometers of the coastal highway — but then again, there was no need to.

They only had to kill those that the convoy could not outrun.

Samara continued to fire her rifle, choosing to concentrate on the more powerful targets, just like Sunny had. On the next civilian transport, Kim was using her carbine to cut down those that managed to get close to the column, while the nameless Sleeper was sending one arrow flying after another.

Belle was using a small throwing hatchet that gruesomely sliced the abominations apart, and then magically returned to his hand.

Dorn was armed with a set of iron javelins that seemed to hit much harder than they were supposed to, even with his prodigious strength.

The convoy cut through the first wave of Nightmare Creatures, leaving broken bodies and bleeding corpses behind. Its defenders continued their barrage, finishing off those Nightmare Creatures that were now gaining on the column from the back.

Sunny rotated his shoulder and winced slightly, then nocked another arrow on the string of his bow and froze for a moment. Peering into the distance, he tried to evaluate the situation.

His face darkened.

'Curse it…'

A few hundred meters ahead, a stream of Nightmare Creatures was spilling on the highway from the mountain slope. And ever further away, behind them, the whole width of the road was blocked by a dark mass of monstrous bodies.

…This time, it was a proper swarm.

One of many they would have to fight their way through, most likely.

Sunny studied the swarm for a split second, then quickly glanced at the ocean.

...At least the dark waves were calm, for now.

With a contemptuous sigh, he sent the arrow flying in the direction of the mountain slope, and then drew his bow again.

This time, his fingers were illuminated by the furious light of a caged lightning.

Chapter-949: Moving Slaughterhouse

As soon as the Strike of Thunder flashed through the darkness of the polar night and burst into blinding arcs of electricity, decimating the center of the swarm, Sunny spoke into his communication device:

"Wedge formation!"

He had created a rift in the middle of the mass of Nightmare Creatures, but it was not enough to clear a path through the blockade. There was the flanking force spilling from the mountains to worry about, too.

The abominations were already dashing toward the convoy, bits of broken cement flying from beneath their sharp claws. The fastest and strongest one, however, suddenly collapsed, a golden arrow piercing its throat.

Behind the Rhino, two military vehicles and two civilian transports accelerated and left the column, assuming positions on both sides of the convoy. From above, it would have looked like a wedge with the APC taking the point, while the other four vehicles formed its wings.

The purpose of that formation was very simple — with the massive shape of the Rhino not blocking their view of the road anymore, both the military vehicles and the Awakened on the roofs of the two civilian transports were free to target the swiftly approaching swarm.

Samara's rifle thundered, and Kim's carbine cracked, sending a rain of bullets into the mass of abominations. Two turrets joined the fray, clearing a path for the convoy to charge through. Sunny continued to let loose arrow after arrow, as well, taking down the most threatening of Nightmare Creatures.

Just a few moments before the column reached the swarm, the four vehicles veered back and returned to their positions, hiding behind the bulk of the speeding Rhino.

'Here we go…'

The ram of the APC plunged into the mass of bodies, both dead and alive, with a violent shudder. Pieces of flesh flew aside as it cleaved a bloody trail through the mob of Nightmare Creatures, allowing the rest of the convoy to follow. They made it through, even if just barely…

However, all was not well.

More than a few abominations managed to lunge at the lead vehicles from the sides. Two or three were clinging to the front of the Rhino, and several more had crashed into Belle's and Dorn's civilian transports. Their claws were already tearing into the alloy.

The more heavily armored Rhino received a few ugly scars, but was still holding. Sunny swiftly drew his bow, finishing off the unwanted passengers. Behind him, Belle dashed toward the edge of the transport's roof and struck down with his hatchet, severing the abomination's limb before it had a chance to rip through the makeshift plate of armor and allow the beast to climb inside.

There was a Nightmare Creature on the other side of the transport, but its body had been caught by the spikes welded along the frame of the civilian vehicle, so it did not manage to rip through the hull before one of Dorn's javelins took it down.

The giant man himself dealt with an abomination that had leaped at his transports by pulling it down mid-jump with his Aspect Ability. The creature hit the cement surface of the road instead of crushing into the side of the vehicle, and was promptly crushed by its wheels.

The weight of the transport loaded with close to a hundred people was not enough to kill an Awakened monster, however, so although it was severely injured, the abomination still tried to get up. Before it could, the next transport rolled over it, and then the next, ending the creature's life in a string of sickening crunches.

Just a few moments after crashing into the swarm, the convoy was through.

The turrets of the military vehicles instantly turned around, unleashing a barrage of bullets at the fastest of pursuing Nightmare Creatures. Samara's tungsten rounds and Sunny's arrows took care of the most resilient of the enemies, while Kim was hurriedly reloading her carbine. The nameless Sleeper had almost emptied his quiver, so he was busy summoning the spent arrows back.

The thinned out swarm was falling behind…

But there were already new enemies appearing from the darkness ahead.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Sunny spun to face north again and drew his bow.

'This is going to get old, fast…'

Surrounded by bloodshed, the convoy continued to devour kilometers as it sped across the wide highway. The battle never really stopped, instead stretching into one continuous, moving slaughterhouse.

Even if there had not been too many Nightmare Creatures near the coast at the start, the lights and noise of the charging column mixed with the smell of fresh blood, attracting more and more of them from the mountains.

All that ever changed was the intensity of combat.

Sometimes the defenders of the convoy only had to repel disorganized mobs of strugglers, killing them off before the abominations could launch an attack on the vehicles. Sometimes a true swarm would appear to block off the road, forcing them to fight their way through while sustaining minor damage and desperately trying to prevent anything from getting to the refugees.

Despite it all, the vehicles were in a good enough shape to remain operational... for now.

The Rhino was covered in scars, and its ram — as well as the whole

front section — had turned slick with blood, making it look like an infernal machine of morbid carnage. The civilian transports had chunks of flesh stuck on their spikes, with deep grooves left behind by the claws of abominations decorating their sides.

The barrels of the turrets on the military vehicles were glowing red, steaming as the chilling darkness of the polar night cooled them down.

The people were starting to get tired, but, prepared to give it their all to reach the destination, continued to perform their duties with stalwart determination.

The highway itself was changing, as well. The further north they moved, the more Nightmare Creatures and the more signs of sustained damage there were. Wide cracks appeared in the concrete, and the column had to maneuver around broken vehicles and carcasses of massive abominations from time to time — the latter picked clean to the bone by other monsters.

Killing the enemies before they reached the column was getting harder and harder because of these obstacles.

At some point, Sunny tensed as he noticed an especially troublesome obstruction blocking off the road ahead.

His face darkened.

'What now?'

Chapter-950: Derailed

Still some distance from the convoy, the whole width of the highway was blocked off by something that looked like a tall wall of alloy. It was surrounded by a scene of pure mayhem, with torn pieces of metal and massive chunks of concrete laying on the road in a chaotic mess.

Sunny scowled, trying to make sense of what he saw. After a second or two, he uttered a silent curse.

Ahead of them, the barrier between the thoroughfare and the railroad was shattered to pieces. The object he had thought to be an alloy wall was actually the roof of a train carriage laying on its side. One of the armored behemoths must have been derailed here at some point in the past, turning a whole section of the highway into a nightmare of broken concrete and mangled alloy.

'Damnation…'

Sunny had ridden an armored train once before, so he knew how fearsome these moving fortresses were. What could have even destroyed an alloy beast like that? He wasn't sure that an earthquake would be enough to derail one of them, even though it was the most reasonable theory he had.

In any case, Sunny had more pressing problems than guessing the fate of the crashed train.

The convoy was not allowed to slow down… the fragile equilibrium they had been able to create was all dependent on the assumption that the column would keep moving. If they lost speed or, even worse, were forced to stop, there would be no escape from death. They would simply drown in Nightmare Creatures.

However, the wreckage of the derailed train was thoroughly blocking

the road.

Sunny grimaced, then spoke a short order into the communication device:

"Sam and Quentin, make the Echoes fall back to the Rhino."

Then, he closed his eyes for a moment and reached forward with his senses.

After becoming a Master and before coming to Antarctica, Sunny had received no opportunities to test the limits of Shadow Manifestation in combat. Now, he knew that his Ascended Ability was more powerful than he had thought… so, he was going to call upon it again.

Before the convoy reached the wreckage, the shadows on the slope of the mountain came to life and flowed forward, forming long tentacles. These tentacles tore through the alloy of the overturned carriage, taking hold of it, and then pulled the massive structure aside. A deafening sound of metal scraping against concrete filled the air.

'Come on… come on…'

The carriage was moved just far enough to create an opening for the approaching Rhino. The APC pulverized several chunks of the concrete barrier with its ram, clearing the road, then maneuvered to the side and slid past the mangled alloy structure.

Behind it, the highway was revealed to be in terrible condition, so it took a lot of skill to navigate the Rhino past the mess of broken metal. Luster was just the man to do it, though. He masterfully avoided all the serious obstacles, and rammed through those that could be destroyed without ever slowing down.

The rest of the vehicles weren't as large as the APC, so it was not too hard for them to follow.

Several abominations crawled from the wreckage to lunge at the convoy, but were swiftly pierced by arrows and poisoned bullets.

Soon, the convoy left the field of debris… but instead of being relieved, Sunny only gritted his teeth.

Obscured by the remains of the armored train, there was another swarm of Nightmare Creatures ahead of them — this one much larger and dangerous than all the previous ones.

Worse still, since they were late to discover it, there was not much time to thin the abominations out with ranged attacks.

The convoy was under real threat.

'Goddammit!'

Sunny briefly glanced at the black bow in his hands, knowing that just its power alone was not going to be enough this time. The situation was dire.

...Which meant that it was time to call the cavalry.

He considered summoning Nightmare near the Rhino and stylishly jumping into the saddle from the roof, like he had seen cool heroes do in webtoons, but then decided against such theatrics.

It was not that Sunny was not capable of landing on the back of a galloping horse from a moving vehicle, it was just that Nightmare's saddle was a Memory, and had to be hoisted on the black steed by hand each time he was summoned.

By now, Sunny was capable of riding his horse without a saddle, but using any kind of melee weapon effectively without stirrups was more or less out of the question. Stirrups were essential to mounted combat, insignificant as they might seem.

He sighed.

'I guess I'm just not cool…'

With that, Sunny summoned Nightmare directly onto the roof of the Rhino, simultaneously calling upon the Sin of Solace and the [Overpriced Saddle].

Soon, the fearsome black stallion was standing in front of him, looking forward with ferocious crimson flames burning in his eyes. Nightmare snarled, revealing two rows of metal fangs that resembled those of a wolf. It seemed that he had plenty of sleep, and now hungered to tear some abominations apart.

Moonlight glinted on the dark surface of the courser's adamantine horns.

"Don't you worry… you'll get a chance to rampage in just a few moments…"

Sunny swiftly put the saddle on the courser's sable back, fastening it into place. Just at that moment, Samara's rifle barked, sending a shining round flashing into the darkness. A chorus of bestial howls was the reply.

He cursed, grabbed the hilt of the Sin of Solace, and jumped into the saddle.

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, sensing insidious whispers assault his mind. Today, they seemed especially clear.

He took a deep breath, then looked forward and sent Nightmare charging.

The black steed lunged forward, jumping from the roof of the Rhino in a tall arc.

…Inside the APC, Luster flinched as adamantine hooves thundered right above his head, and then craned his neck to stare at the swift shape of the leaping steed.

"Aaaa, what the h—hell!"

He paused for a moment, and then added in a stifled voice:

"...Damn majestic."

Plummeting toward the mass of abominations, Sunny gripped the hilt of the Sin of Solace tighter and poured essence into the Dying Wish, activating its sole enchantment.

'Let's teach these bastards the meaning of true fear, Nightmare…'

Chapter-951: Outrider

Nightmare landed on the surface of the highway less than a hundred meters away from the rushing swarm and galloped forward without ever slowing down. The wind howled in Sunny's ears as the dark stallion's adamantine hooves rang sonorously on the cold concrete.

A vicious grin somehow found its way to Sunny's face.

'I must have lost my mind…'

Diving headlong into a tide of hundreds of Nightmare Creatures was no cause for a smile, but for some reason, he felt exhilarated. Perhaps it was the sinister whispers of the cursed jade sword that were subtly influencing him…

Perhaps, Nightmare was simply not the only one who longed to go on a murderous rampage. Ever since LO49, nothing had gone right for Sunny. The bitter pressure of it all fueled him with frustration and anger, and the anger wished for a way out.

Now, he was going to unleash it on these damned abominations.

"Die!"

Driven into a mad frenzy by the call of the Dying Wish, the first of the Nightmare Creatures leaped into the air, its fangs glinting in the moonlight. Sunny leaned forward to cut it apart, but before he could, Nightmare's jaw snapped and tore the beast's throat open. With a violent twist of his neck, the black stallion sent the convulsing body flying into the mass of abominations.

…In the next moment, they plunged into the swarm.

The Sin of Solace sang, slicing creature after creature apart. Wrapped in shadows, Sunny fought with stunning speed and precision,

obliterating any abominations that tried to get close. It was as though he was surrounded by a whirlwind of rending jade. The flesh of Nightmare Creatures parted before the white blade of the beautiful jian like water.

Nightmare was no less deadly. The dark steed galloped forward, slaughtering creatures with his fangs, his horns, and his hooves. Some were torn apart, some were thrown to the ground and trampled to death, some were simply tossed aside like broken dolls by a shattering crash with the destrier's wide chest.

He rushed through the mass of abominations like a dark omen of dread, leaving a bloody trail in his wake.

To Sunny, it seemed as though Nightmare was especially lethal today. Perhaps it had to do with the black steed's long slumber, or maybe it was just a powerful combination of enchantments, Attributes, and Abilities that made the spacious coastal highway a perfect battlefield for his Shadow.

Nightmare's speed, strength, and resilience were enhanced when surrounded by darkness and shadows, and the polar night provided plenty of both.

The tenebrous stallion's might also grew the more he was feared, and currently, both his own [Mantle of Fear] Ability and the [Omen of Dread] enchantment of the Sin of Solace were poisoning the rabid minds of hundreds of Nightmare Creatures with insidious terror.

Maybe most importantly, the [Nightmare] Ability made the black steed more powerful the more nightmares he had subjugated, and by now, there were hundreds of conquered dreams serving as his thralls.

All of this meant that the large swarm of abominations blocking the convoy's path was in for a sea of suffering.

…However, that was not enough.

Even while sundering one revolting body after another, Sunny saw that there were simply too many abominations ahead of them to slaughter them all. For now, Nightmare and he had been able to

continue their bloody charge without slowing down, but as soon as enough abominations threw themselves into the carnage, that was bound to change.

Once the rampaging stallion was stopped, the swarm could potentially overwhelm them by burying both under a mountain of bodies. Sunny and Nightmare could escape such a trap by turning into shadows, of course…

But, even if Sunny could eventually kill every single abomination, it would take too much time. Not only would more Nightmare Creatures inevitably join the mayhem, but the convoy was less than a dozen seconds from reaching the swarm.

He had to remind himself that his goal was not to slaughter the hateful wretches that had dared to stand in his way… his goal was to clear a path for the column of battered human vehicles, whose passengers all depended on him to deliver them to safety.

'Curses…'

By now, most of the swarm must have been affected by the pull of the Dying Wish. All of them had nothing on their mind but one all-consuming desire — to rip Sunny apart. Using that to his advantage, he commanded Nightmare to veer left, cutting through the tide of abominations and getting closer to the ocean.

The black stallion pivoted and changed the direction of his murderous charge, but was soon met by an impenetrable wall of claws, fangs, suckers, and hideous appendages of all kinds. Even with Sunny dismantling one abomination after another with the Sin of Solace, the mass of them right ahead seemed too overwhelming to fight through it.

Nightmare, however, seemed to think differently. Continuing forward at the same speed, he let out a contemptuous snort, and then soared into a powerful jump. His hooves landed on the sea of abominations, crushing a few skulls, and then used the bloody pulp as support for a second leap.

Before the Nightmare Creatures could react and tear at the stallion's

belly, the two of them landed just outside the swarm, on the narrow stretch of empty land between the highway and the vast expanse of undulating black waves.

Suppressing a shiver, Sunny sent Nightmare closer to the ocean, and then closer still, almost into the shallows, to the point where fountains of cold water started to fly from the courser's hooves with each stride.

Just as expected, the swarm rushed to pursue the terrible steed and its slaughtering rider. The mass of abominations spilled from the highway both behind and in front of them, aiming to surround the enemy once more.

…Just as planned.

With that many abominations leaving the road, the convoy received a chance to slip through. Luster sent the Rhino crashing through the barrier separating the railroad from the thoroughfare, and continued forward along the slopes of the mountains, plowing through a few stragglers with its ram. The column of vehicles followed, with the Irregulars clearing the path ahead as well as they could.

Looking to his right, Sunny saw the massive silhouette of the APC speeding past his position, barely visible behind the sea of monsters. With a sigh, he ordered Nightmare to slow down, so that the swarm would concentrate on them and give the convoy a chance to pull ahead.

A few moments later, the tide of abominations descended upon them. Sunny and Nightmare fought like fiends, eviscerating dozens of creatures — the Shadow in a brutally gruesome way, his Master with clean cuts of a pristine jade blade. Slowly, a pile of corpses started to grow around them, making it hard for new enemies to lunge at the dreadful pair.

After this battle, Nightmare would have sown plenty of seeds of fear to harvest later… of that, Sunny had no doubt.

But even then, their luck was bound to run out.

At some point, the mass of abominations pressing down on them had become too great to resist. The pile of corpses careened dangerously, threatening to entomb both Nightmare and Sunny, and new creatures were raining down on them like a flood. Behind them, the deep dark ocean murmured, cutting off the retreat.

Just a moment before the tidal wave of Nightmare Creatures crashed on them…

Both the horse and the rider disappeared, turning into elusive shadows.

As they glided past the frenzied sea of abomination, embraced by darkness, a choir of maddened howls tore the night apart.

Chapter-952: Hidden Giant

On a dark desolate highway, a black steed and its bleak rider emerged from the shadows. Adamantine hooves rang on concrete as they flew forward through the falling snow, soon catching up with a small column of battered vehicles.

Overtaking one transport after another, Sunny briefly evaluated their condition. The convoy was roughly halfway to its destination, and none of the vehicles had failed… yet. Each looked as if it had gone through a meat grinder, but whatever the technicians had done to the transports was still keeping them from breaking down on the road.

Hopefully, that would continue to be the case.

His soldiers were doing a good job of warding off the Nightmare Creatures, as well. Nothing had managed to attack the column in his absence. The refugees were all intact.

Glancing at the military vehicles, Sunny sent a short communication to Gere:

"How much ammo do you have left, Sergeant?"

The response came in a crackle of interference:

"Glad… you back, Captain… sufficient… or two… nearly spent…"

Sunny frowned. The worsening quality of the signal could mean only one thing. They seemed to be approaching a powerful Gate.

He concentrated for a moment to sense the Call, and felt that it was gradually growing louder.

'Goddammit…'

With a grimace, Sunny sent Nightmare forward and soon reached the

head of the convoy, galloping alongside the Rhino. He caught a glimpse of Luster, who was concentrating on driving the APC, and then looked into the darkness ahead.

At the moment, there were not enough stragglers on the road to make him summon back Morgan's Warbow — Abomination and Blackie were enough to deal with them. However, in the distance, still a few kilometers away, Sunny saw a hint of wrongness hidden in the darkness of the polar night.

There was an ugly rift in the fabric of reality there, one that seemed small and inconsequential from distance, but had to be considerably wide and tall up close, blocking most of the highway.

A Nightmare Gate.

The question was… how long ago had it manifested?

Depending on the answer, the abominations brought into the waking world by it could have long wandered away in search of prey, or were still lingering around.

'There is only one way to find out, I guess.'

Not in a hurry to get back to the roof of the Rhino, Sunny remained in the saddle, wielding the Sin of Solace in one of his hands. He was tensely looking at the swiftly approaching Gate, trying to notice the shapes of Nightmare Creatures that could have been hiding on the highway or the mountain slope nearby… even in the cold waters of the dark ocean.

There were no enemies in the water, and no enemies on the road. However, the mountain slopes made him feel tense, for some reason. Disturbed, Sunny studied the cliffs rising above the highway to understand what he had missed. Their shape was somewhat irregular, but he did not see any movement…

That was until the slope itself moved, unfurling long limbs and turning away from the mountain to face the highway.

Sunny uttered a stifled curse.

At ten meters tall, the creature was gargantuan. Its rough and uneven hide was almost of the same texture as the stone slope of the mountain, and its eight segmented legs resembled wide pillars. It looked like a giant spider with an enormous, bulbous beehive attached to its carapace, and there were hundreds of small crimson eyes burning in the dark holes of that massive hump.

Sunny's mouth turned dry.

'...A tyrant.'

He did not know what Rank the creature was, but it had to be a tyrant… one that carried an army of minions within its body, no less. The towering abomination was a dire threat itself, just from its sheer size alone, and there was no telling how strong and numerous the lesser monsters were.

Worst of all, the convoy had no choice but to rush toward it.

Overtaking the Rhino, Sunny gritted his teeth. His mind was in disarray, and the damned whispers of the cursed sword were not making it any easier for him to think.

'How the hell do I deal with that thing?'

There was still almost a minute left before they would reach the Gate and its Guardian, so that was how long he had to come up with a solution.

Sunny swiftly considered his best options. He could send Nightmare charging forward and attack the tyrant with his most powerful weapon, the Sin of Solace, to either cripple, kill, or lead the creature away from the road.

Depending on the Rank of the giant spider, that could either be a very good or an utterly terrible decision.

Alternatively, he could summon his bow and finally use the wasteful, but devastating [Death Dealer] enchantment, potentially delivering a severe wound or outright killing the tyrant on the spot. The minions could be dealt with if he followed up with the Strike of Thunder, too…

But if that did not work, he would be risking the entire convoy.

'Damnation!'

Sunny almost commanded Nightmare to rush toward the tyrant, but at that moment… something strange happened.

The giant spider, who had been staring at the approaching human vehicles with malevolent intensity, suddenly froze for a moment, and then took a step back.

Then, the creature turned around and rushed toward the mountain, climbing the slope with its long, powerful legs. Just a few seconds later, it was far away from the highway, and continuing to get further, large boulders rolling down from where it had passed.

It was almost as if the tyrant was scurrying away.

Sunny blinked, dumbstruck by the unexpected turn of events. In front of him, the highway was empty, with only the pulsating rift of the Gate obstructing its middle section.

'What… the hell?'

Why did it look as though the tyrant was... running from something?

Before Sunny could digest the new information, a cold shiver suddenly ran down his spine, and his hair almost stood on end. A sense of danger and fear like he had never experienced before suddenly burst into his mind.

Swinging his head to stare at the ocean, his eyes wide, Sunny felt a colossal shadow rising from the depths of the cold water.

The waves retreated a few meters back, and then…

A titanic stone hand suddenly broke the surface and soared into the night sky. The arm of the submerged giant rose above the coastal highway like a dark tower, easily reaching twenty or thirty meters into the air.

...And then careened, starting to fall in the direction of the convoy.

Chapter-953: Titan

Sunny froze, mesmerized by the harrowing sight of a dark expanse of weathered stone rising from the depths of the ocean. It rose higher and higher, rivers of water flowing down from the numerous grooves and ravines covering the surface of the giant's arm. Due to the scale, it seemed as though the arm was moving deceptively slowly, but he knew that to be an illusion.

A single thought formed in Sunny's stunned mind.

'Goliath…'

One of the three titans that had come to the Antarctic Center. It had to be him… the Whispering Legion was dead, and the Winter Beast prowled somewhere far to the north. The last one, stone giant Goliath, had disappeared without a trace. Army Command had no accurate data on his current location, the last time Sunny had been in contact with them.

…No wonder, if the missing titan had been traveling through the shallows off the coast of the landmass.

'It's… it's a damn Fallen Titan.'

A moment later, Sunny suddenly came to his senses, shrugging off the dread and awe of witnessing the enormous creature… or rather, one of its limbs. What was the big deal, anyway? The Goliath was a runt, as far as titans were concerned. He was simply a giant stone abomination, instead of a sentient force of nature. Even then, Sunny had seen far greater beings before…

However, the damned titan — no matter how he compared to others of its kind — could destroy the convoy with one brush of his finger.

Barely suppressing his panic, Sunny stared at the falling hand of the

giant, then twisted around and waved at Luster, shouting as loud as he could:

"Go, go, go! Speed up!"

If there was one blessing in this dreadful situation, it was that Goliath's aim seemed to be a bit off. If the convoy accelerated, they had a slim chance of shooting underneath the gargantuan arm before it slammed into the highway.

Should they end up being just a little bit too slow, at least a couple of vehicles would be instantly flattened by the titanic blow… but stopping meant death, so there was no other choice.

The Rhino dashed forward, gaining a bit more speed. Sunny and Nightmare galloped ahead of it, diving into the shadow of the swiftly falling hand and emerging from it on the other side. The APC was just behind them.

Sunny's heart was beating wildly as he counted off seconds… the first of the civilian transports appeared behind him, then another, and another.

'Not yet, not yet…'

Finally, the rear vehicle shot past the Gate. A few moments later, Goliath's arm hit the concrete surface of the highway, pulverizing a large swath of it and sending a localized earthquake spreading from the point of impact.

Nightmare stumbled, but righted himself a split second later. Some distance behind, the wheels of the rearmost military vehicle momentarily flew into the air, then hit the cracked surface of the road with a screeching sound. Somehow, the driver managed to maintain control of the vehicle and desperately sped forward, hoping to get away from the colossal threat.

'Made it…'

Sunny let out a groan, knowing that their narrow escape from death was both temporary and futile. No matter how fast the convoy was moving, they had no hope of outrunning a titan. Now that Goliath

was aiming for them, there was no chance of salvation.

Unless something managed to stall the giant for a few minutes, the convoy was doomed.

'Not fair, not fair… this is not fair!'

After all they had been through, after everything he had done, this was the end? Sunny felt like howling at the moon in sorrow and anger.

Behind them, the enormous hand scraped against the concrete, and then, a titanic shape started to rise from the ocean. Goliath was pulling himself out of the cold water, its ugly head emerging from beneath the waves first.

Sunny shuddered.

The titan was somewhat humanoid in appearance, but far from resembling a graceful statue. Unlike the magnificent monuments of the Forgotten Shore, Goliath looked more like a small mountain that had come to life than an effigy of a human. The surface of its body was rough and unpolished, like a natural cliff, and its proportions were all wrong.

His legs were powerful and stocky, and its torso was massive and asymmetrical, with mounds of stone rising from its back like humps. The giant had three arms, each hand possessing a different number of thick, short fingers.

His head was like a misshapen hill of brown rock, with two cavernous holes gaping in it, drowned by darkness, and a single circular eye set deep in the center of his forehead.

At least Sunny thought that it was an eye. The thing was milky-white and round, but seemed to be cut of stone, like the rest of the titan's body. The thought of being gazed upon by the giant eye made him feel a deep sense of primal terror.

…Or rather, even more of it.

Sunny knew that the convoy had no hope of escaping the titan. But

they still had to try.

The column sped up as much as it could, the battered vehicles burning through whatever they had left to distance themselves from the terrible monstrosity. The turrets unleashed a barrage of bullets, which hit the weathered stone of the titan's body in twisting streams.

However, their impacts were like mosquito bites to the giant… less than, even. Mosquitos could break the skin of their prey, at least.

Goliath climbed onto the highway, his massive shape barely fitting between the mountains and the ocean. Countless waterfalls continued to stream off his body, falling down and forming a pool in the obliterated section of the road.

The titan's single eye moved, locking on the escaping convoy. And then, the creature took a step forward…

The whole world seemed to tremble from the terrible weight of Goliath's massive foot.

Just with this single step, the damned giant covered a lion's share of distance between him and the desperately speeding convoy. Whatever hope of escape Sunny had left was instantly shattered.

'...Curse you.'

He stared at the towering shape of Goliath for a few seconds, his pale face full of dark resentment.

Then, Sunny turned Nightmare around and dashed past the convoy, charging directly at the fearsome titan.

Chapter-954: Only Darkness

Because of how close they were to an active Gate, the internal communications barely worked across the convoy. However, Sunny had been prepared for something like that. Translating his thoughts to the Extraordinary Rock, he sent a short message to Luster:

"No matter what happens, continue forward and don't slow down. I'll catch up with the convoy later."

'...Hopefully.'

He shot past the column of vehicles, heading in an entirely wrong direction. What kind of madman would be riding toward a Fallen Titan? Sunny only had enough time to notice frightened expressions on the faces of the Irregulars, who stared at his flashing silhouette in shock, and then the convoy was somewhere behind him. Getting further and further away.

The towering shape of Goliath, on the other hand, was drawing closer. Looking at the approaching titan, Sunny shivered.

'Can I kill a titan?'

He was honestly not sure. One thing he did know, though, was that he wouldn't be able to kill this particular titan.

If Sunny had time to study Goliath, learn his weaknesses, and prepare, then things might have been different. But Army Command knew very little about the stone monstrosity, and so, he knew even less. If the two of them fought to the death, there was no question of who would end up dying.

Luckily, Sunny did not have to make a heroic last stand. He was no hero, and had no plans of being killed any time soon. And so, his goal was not to destroy the colossal creature… he just wanted to slow the

big bastard down.

If the convoy was given time to get away, there was a good chance that Goliath would not follow them. A bit further north, a long stretch of the highway was built under overhanging cliffs, so the giant's enormous size would become a hindrance.

Unless Goliath was ready to smash through many kilometers of solid rock or dive back into the ocean, he was going to have trouble keeping up with the swift vehicles.

And even if he was ready to wreck the whole mountain range, that would also slow him down.

A few minutes… Sunny just had to buy the convoy a few minutes.

'...How the hell do I stop a titan for a few minutes, though?'

Nightmare stopped in the middle of the road, dwarfed by the nearing silhouette of Goliath. Sunny stared at the stone giant, shivering as he felt the inhuman gaze fall on him in return. The weight of it was almost palpable, pressing him down like an echo of the Crushing.

There was a stretch of the quaking highway left between them, but with the creature's colossal height, it was going to be covered in just a few steps.

Sunny took a deep breath, and then forced his wildly beating heart to calm down.

Jumping off his steed, he walked a small distance forward and stopped, his face full of defiant spitefulness.

"You really shouldn't have done this during the night, blockhead…"

With that, he sent his essence forward.

On the slopes of the mountains and on the dark ribbon of the ocean shore, the mass of shadows moved, coming to life. Then, a thick black chain shot from the darkness, wrapping itself around one of the titan's arms.

It was followed by another, and another. Dozens of dark chains flew from the ground, the mountain slope, and the edge of the coast, shackling Goliath's arms and legs. Sunny was utterly focused, his eyes drowned by deep shadow. His essence surged and flowed like a tide, saturating the deep darkness of the polar night.

He was burning through all of it without looking back, knowing that nothing but would be enough for the impossible task.

…Fortunately, if there was one thing he knew all about, it was chains — both literal and metaphorical. He might have not learned how to escape every chain just yet, but he had learned about being bound a long time ago.

At first, Goliath did not seem burdened by the shadow chains at all. He continued moving forward, dragging them along. He did not even show a sign of noticing them.

However, Sunny was not done. A crooked grin appeared on his pale face, and suddenly, it seemed as though the night itself had come to life. Countless chains shot toward the towering titan, binding his limbs.

Where there were dozens, there were now hundreds. Sunny felt as if his brain was on fire, and wasn't quite sure how he was managing to keep this many manifested shadows shaped, tangible, and strong at the same time.

But he was doing it, and more than that, new chains appeared from the darkness every second. Goliath looked like he was carrying a forest of them on his body, anchored to the ground so thoroughly that, finally…

The titan's march slowed down.

Just a little bit at first, but then more and more. The towering monstrosity lowered his torso and pushed forward, a hint of irritation appearing in his bearing. But the more he pushed forward, the more the chains held him back.

And there were new ones appearing every moment, wrapping

themselves around him like snakes.

In the end, the titan came to a stop just a few dozen meters away from Sunny, less than a step, bent low and utterly immobilized. The shadow chains groaned, cracking as if on the verge of snapping, but held.

From the side, it looked as if the giant was trying to kneel in front of a defiant ant.

Sunny let out a shaky breath, and then swayed slightly, feeling drops of blood falling from his nose. His essence was disappearing at a terrible rate. At this point, he wouldn't be able to sustain the hundreds of shadow chains for long… but no matter how much time that was going to buy, it was already enough.

...Probably.

His mind was somewhat hazy.

'I think I overdid it this time...'

And when had the whispers of the Sin of Solace gotten so loud?

Right now, Sunny felt like he could make out what they were saying.

No… he definitely could.

The cursed sword whispered into his ear, its voice indistinguishable from his own. It only said one word:

"Useless."

Sunny's eyes widened slightly.

In the next moment, dozens of chains wrapped around one of Goliath's legs snapped with a deafening crack.

'Oh.'

The titan's foot shot forward with astonishing speed, and smashed into Sunny with the weight of a mountain.

There was the howling of the wind, and indescribable pain, but mercifully, it did not last long.

Then, there was only darkness.

Chapter-955: The End

Sunny died.

Being dead… wasn't too bad, all things considered.

More or less every bone in his body was shattered. His rib cage had caved in, and sharp bone fragments were piercing his lungs. His limbs were twisted at unnatural angles, and his skull had cracked. There was excruciating pain, but it went away almost immediately, since his spine was broken, and his spinal cord was severed.

Bone Weave had tempered his bones and made them incredibly durable, but everything had its limits. For Sunny, that limit had turned out to be being kicked by a literal mountain, apparently.

He could not see anything, because his eyes had burst, and could not hear anything, because his eardrums had ruptured. The world was dark and silent.

It was almost comfortable, if not for the terrible cold.

Sunny was very, very cold.

'Ah, damnation…'

Could he not just die in peace?

"...You really are a useless piece of outskirt trash."

Despite not being able to hear anything, he heard the cold, contemptuous voice. His own voice.

'Gods, can you shut the hell up?'

Sunny sent his shadow sense outward and found out that his broken body was laying on the very edge of the dark water, with icy waves

washing his blood off the stone shore and licking his skin.

No wonder he felt cold.

Goliath was nowhere to be seen, but the weakening tremors that shook the world from time to time told him that the titan was walking away, heading inland. Unable to move, Sunny imagined letting out a sigh.

'...What luck.'

He might have died, but at least the giant had not stepped on him. His body had stopped just outside the dark waves after flying away and ricocheting off the concrete surface of the highway, too. Otherwise, to add insult to injury, he would have had to drown as well.

But since he had not… now, it was time to come back to life.

'Oh, this is going to hurt…'

Sunny was dead, but of course, such trivialities were not going to stop him. He had not spent most of the Antarctica campaign wearing the Undying Chain without a reason, after all.

[Undying] Enchantment Description: "The wearer can not die."

…As long as he had essence to spare, death was just a temporary condition for Sunny. It was no different from having his head cut off in the Red Colosseum, and he had survived that debacle without too much trouble.

Simply being unable to die for a few minutes was not going to save him, sadly. Back then, Sunny had been healed by Elyas before running out of essence… but now, there was no one to help him.

As soon as he burned through his essence, he would inevitably die.

'Well, I'll just help myself, then…'

Sunny summoned the runes.

He did not have eyes anymore, and yet he was still able to perceive them, somehow. It was both strange and logical, explaining how Cassie had been able to communicate with the Spell all that time.

'Huh...'

Finding the Dying Wish in the list of his Memories, he concentrated on it and read the description of the Transcendent charm's sole enchantment:

[Death Wish] Enchantment Description: "Those who witness the wielder of this Memory are compelled; friends to be inspired, foes to seek the wielder out. The power of the Memory grows the more enemies they give the gift of death, and can be consumed to heal the wielder's wounds."

Death Charge: [1000/1000].

…Sunny had not been idle since coming to Antarctica. He had saturated the counter of the Dying Wish a long time ago by slaughtering countless Nightmare Creatures across the Antarctic Center.

Now, it was finally time to use that hidden ace.

Feeling his essence running dry and a numbing fog enveloping his mind, Sunny activated the healing enchantment.

Instantly, there was a change.

A furious flood of power rushed into his broken body, repairing it. His eardrums were restored, his liquified eyes slowly started to coalesce back into solid shape. His fractured bones assembled themselves from hundreds of small fragments.

The severed sections of his spinal cord connected back together.

"Argh! Crap!"

The pain was back, sending him into a violent convulsion. Sunny bit his tongue hard enough to feel the salty taste of blood, but a moment later, that wound, too, was healed. The agony of it all was nothing

short of exquisite.

"C—curse it!"

…But it was all good. Pain was good. Pain meant that he was alive, or at least coming back to life. It was its absence that was frightening.

A full charge of the powerful Transcendent Memory was enough to bring his body back from being utterly devastated, but the process was not instantaneous. Even with Blood Weave helping, it took some time. Sunny had no choice but to endure, and wait.

He was no stranger to agony, anyway.

At some point, he regained his vision. Raising his head weakly, Sunny looked at himself through the veil of tears. What he saw made him feel disheartened.

The Undying Chain was all but gone. The bleak steel of his armor was shattered and mangled to the point of being unrecognizable. A few pieces of it were bent at sharp angles and pierced his flesh, slowing down the process of healing.

Sunny stared at the bloody mess that was his body for a few moments, then thought that he should probably dismiss the armor.

However, he did not need to.

Almost at the same moment, the Undying Chain suddenly shone with soft radiance, and then disintegrated into a whirlwind of white sparks. The brilliant sparks danced around him for a few seconds, caressing his skin before disappearing without a trace, forever.

The familiar voice of the Spell whispered into his ear:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

…Sunny dropped his head back into the water.

'...Thank you.'

The Undying Chain had held long enough for the healing power of

the Dying Wish to bring him back from the doors of death, refusing to succumb to the terrible damage before he was safely on his way to being healed… as if on purpose. True to its name to the very end.

It was sort of poetic.

'I guess dying makes one sentimental.'

What the hell was he thinking about? It was just a suit of armor… an armor-type Memory. Memories did not have thoughts, aspirations, and feelings.

Well… most didn't.

Turning his head slightly, Sunny stared at the beautiful jade shape of the Sin of Solace, which was laying on the stones a few steps away from him. His eyes darkened a little.

'So it was you, all that time. Messing with my mind and calling me names?'

The moonlight glinted on the pristine white blade. Everything was silent for a few moments, and then, Sunny's own voice answered, full of disdain:

"Took you long enough to realize. As expected of an uneducated rat."

Sunny gritted his teeth and stifled the desire to dismiss the damned sword immediately.

He had already lost his armor, and leaving himself without a weapon would not be a very good decision.

Ignoring the insidious whispers, Sunny let out a pained groan, and then stood up with a stagger.

He was all but naked, terribly fatigued, and suffering from extreme essence exhaustion…

But he was also, undoubtedly, not dead.

Sunny came back to life.

Chapter-956: Follower

Sunny stood on the shore of the ocean, shivering and considering if he should fall down and take a long, relaxing rest in the cold water. His reserves of essence were utterly spent, and with it came the sickening feeling of fragility and weakness.

Awakened experienced a form of backlash when burning through all of their essence, but it was only a little bit harmful. The weakness would pass, and there would be no long-term harm done… he just had to weather the immediate consequence.

The more concerning aspect of the situation was that he did not even have enough essence to summon a single Memory. Looking down at the threadbare rags of his once-pristine black bodysuit, Sunny sighed.

For now, that was all that separated him from the bitter cold and the chilling winds of Antarctica.

'I need to get back to the convoy.'

Trying to get his tired mind to work properly, Sunny hesitated for a moment.

'...But first, I need to check on Nightmare.'

The stallion was nowhere to be seen, so he was afraid of what had happened to his steed. The runes were still shimmering in the air in front of Sunny, so he turned his attention back to them.

…Death Charge: [0/1000].

The charge of the Dying Wish was completely spent, but it had done its job…

The Undying Chain was gone.

Turning away from the list of Memories with a sigh, he looked at the status of his Shadows. The runes describing Nightmare shone as always, so the black steed was not destroyed.

'Then where is he?'

Sunny frowned, then softly hit himself on the forehead, remembering that he could simply check his innate connection to the Shadow. Without wasting any time, he reached inward and tried to sense it within his soul.

Soon, Sunny felt Nightmare's presence. The connection was not really meant to share information, but he could still tell that the black steed was nearby, and in the middle of a battle… the battle did not seem dire or dangerous, though.

The stallion was most likely dealing with stray Nightmare Creatures that could have attacked Sunny while he was still healing.

'...Good, then. We can get away from here as soon as he is finished.'

Sunny swayed a little, then glanced at his four shadows, who were all staring at him with different expressions. The happy shadow was beside itself… but strangely, the other three were also showing some degree of uncharacteristic positivity. Even the gloomy one appeared somewhat relieved.

He grinned.

"What, did you think that a mere titan would be enough to get rid of me? Dream on…"

With that, Sunny looked north, wondering how long it would take to catch up with the convoy, then took a couple steps forward and leaned down to pick up the Sin of Solace.

'That damned thing…'

The closer his fingers got to the jade hilt, the more it seemed as though the cursed sword was smiling ominously.

"Behind you."

Sunny scoffed.

"As if I would be gullible enough to…"

At that moment, a swift shape shot through the darkness and collided with him.

A tearing pain pierced Sunny's side, and he was sent flying into the water. Hitting the dark surface with a pained scream, he scraped his hands on the cold stones beneath and rolled, jumping to his feet a split second later.

A handful of sharp rocks flew in the direction of the unknown attacker, meant to slow whoever it was down. However, the creature was still standing in the spot where Sunny had been a few moments ago, staring at him with inhuman eyes.

Sunny staggered.

Briefly looking down, he saw that a sizable chunk of flesh was torn out of his side. Blood Weave had stemmed the bleeding, but the wound still looked gruesome.

Then, he glanced back at the bastard who had bitten him.

The creature… looked vaguely familiar. It was short, barely reaching Sunny's abdomen, with dark skin and bone plates covering its scrawny body like a suit of light armor. The damned goblin did not look too formidable, but it had a wide mouth full of sharp, triangular teeth.

…It was also missing two fingers on its right hand.

Sunny blinked a couple of times, remembering a tiny imp that he had once failed to finish off. The wretch had grown a lot since their last meeting… however, it was still on the smaller side.

Looking up, he noticed a lump of bleeding flesh in the abomination's mouth. His face contorted in anger.

Sunny clenched his fists and opened his mouth, but before he could say anything… the Scavenger seemed to grin spitefully, and then

swallowed the lump of flesh with a look of pure hatred written on its ugly face.

Sunny's eyes widened.

"You… you wicked little shit!"

He had let the imp go once, but the bastard did not know his luck.

'That's great… I'll just kill him now!'

Full of fury, Sunny took a step forward, but then staggered. The world suddenly turned hazy, and his head spun.

'What the…'

His side somehow both growing numb and burning with terrible pain. His body felt even weaker than before.

Slowly looking down, he saw a strangely familiar black liquid flowing out of the gruesome wound. No… it was his blood, which was not stopping, for some reason. The blood had simply turned black.

His face paled.

'...Black Venom?'

How did he get poisoned with Black Venom?

Sunny froze for a split second.

'No way...'

The abomination in front of him was a Scavenger — a type of Nightmare Creature that inherited traits of that which it consumed. Had he feasted on the flesh of slain Black Tongues that the convoy had left floating in the mountain lake?

…Had the little bastard been following the convoy all that time, stuffing himself with all the corpses and carcasses that they had left behind?

Growing and waiting for a chance to avenge himself on Sunny?

Suddenly, he wanted to laugh.

"Bastard… you waited all that time, only to deliver yourself into my hands now…"

Sunny took another step forward, commanding the shadows to wrap themselves around his body.

Before he could, however…

The Scavenger suddenly dashed forward with tremendous speed, and a dreadful blow crashed into Sunny's abdomen. With the wind knocked out of him, he was thrown back and fell on his back.

A split second later, the abomination was on top of Sunny, two unexpectedly powerful hands wrapped around his neck, strangling him. A vicious, hateful snarl escaped from between the creature's bloodied teeth.

Sunny's head was pushed beneath the surface of the waves, and ice-cold water instantly filled his mouth and nose. He tried to push the Scavenger off, but his body was too weak to resist the furious fiend.

'Wait… wait…'

Before Sunny could come up with a single coherent thought, his consciousness started to fade, and a dangerous darkness encroached on his mind.

…And then, he got angry, too.

Chapter-957: Tooth and Nail

'Why… is this happening to me… twice in a row? W—what is this crap?!'

Sunny was being strangled and drowned, with his mutilated side on fire because of seawater getting into the ugly wound. The hateful Scavenger had turned out to be astonishingly strong for his demure size… or maybe it was Sunny who was too weak.

He was utterly drained of essence, still recovering from being stomped on by a titan, and had a powerful toxin coursing through his veins on top of everything, after all.

In any case, no matter how desperately he tried to shake the little bastard off his body, it was all in vain.

'Argh!'

The thought of surviving an encounter with a Fallen Titan, only to be killed by this pathetic waste of an abomination, made him feel bitter and slighted. Especially because the damned gremlin was barely half his size…

"Just give up. Your life is meaningless, anyway."

Feeling his consciousness starting to slip, Sunny tried to snarl.

'Shut… the hell… up!'

The Sin of Solace remained silent for a moment, and then laughed.

"...It is amusing how desperately you are trying to survive, knowing that all that is waiting for you is a lifetime of being a slave."

That was the last drop… no, actually, being ambushed by the odious little goblin had been the last drop. After months of suffering setback

after setback and enduring the stress of guiding men through a disastrous war campaign, having to restrain himself to project the image of a capable and composed leader, Sunny had finally had enough of it.

Suddenly, he was very, very angry.

He was positively furious.

Sunny was furious at the world itself, but since the spiteful gremlin was the only creature near him, the bastard was going to have to be the sole target of his anger.

'Come here, you wretched waif…'

Letting go of the two thin, but surprisingly strong hands that were currently strangling him, Sunny reached up and found the creature's face. The Scavenger immediately tried to bite his fingers off, and a sharp pain pierced Sunny's right thumb.

Luckily, the scrawny abomination was no Goliath. Bone Weave might have surrendered to the titanic blow of the giant's stone foot, but it did not give in to the Scavengers unreasonably sharp teeth. So, Sunny had kept his finger, even though it got cruelly mangled.

Not even noticing the pain, he grabbed the hateful gremlin's face, and then pressed his left thumb into the creature's eye as hard as he could.

That, at least, got a reaction.

Shocked, the Scavenger recoiled… and even if it was only for a moment, his grip on Sunny's neck weakened.

That was all he needed.

Shifting beneath the abomination, Sunny managed to bend his knee, insert it between their bodies, and then throw the bastard away. The gluttonous goblin might have been far stronger than he had any business being, but he was still comparatively light. His scrawny body flew away, landing back on the stone shore.

'Where do you think you're going… I'm not finished with you yet, damned pest…'

Rising from the water, Sunny sucked in a hoarse breath, and then glared at the Scavenger with bloodshot, murderous eyes.

"Come here…"

The spiteful creature was happy to oblige. He jumped back to his feet and lunged forward, but then stumbled and grabbed his abdomen with a confused look.

Sunny grinned.

"What, do you have a stomach ache?"

That was probably Blood Weave doing its thing.

Sunny's blood was not really poisonous, but it had a disturbing propensity of trying to return to its source when separated from it. So, swallowing a chunk of his flesh was almost like swallowing a handful of metal shavings, and then walking to stand in front of a powerful magnet.

The bastard had to be in a world of pain…

'No... not yet, he isn't...'

Sunny dashed toward the vile goblin, and used the momentary lapse in their battle to shift his vision and get a look at his enemy's soul. What he saw surprised him.

The Scavenger, who had started as a tiny pipsqueak of a Nightmare Creature, had not only grown many times its size physically, but also spiritually. Judging by the hideous darkness spreading through his soul, he was now a Fallen Demon… Sunny was pretty sure that the pathetic abomination he had failed to kill at LO49 was both of a lesser Rank and a lower Class, so it was a bit startling.

'Well, no matter. He'll die all the same…'

The two of them clashed at the edge of the water. The Scavenger was

strong, fast, and vicious, but Sunny was augmented by four shadows.

Sadly, the augmentation of the shadows was not set in stone, instead enhancing his own physical state. And since his physical state was currently at the rock bottom, Sunny was still far away from being able to perform at his peak. Weakness multiplied by five might have transformed into a kind of strength, but not the sort he was used to.

Still… he was both bigger and stronger than the feral gremlin, even if the gap was not as large as it was supposed to be. The creature only had a slight advantage in speed.

Wishing to crush the bastard with his own two hands, Sunny tried to grapple the Scavenger and bring him to the ground, but the hateful imp managed to slip from his grasp at the last moment and lashed out with his maimed hand… delivering a vicious blow right into Sunny's wounded side.

The explosion of pain made stars appear in his eyes. A strange wheezing sound escape from between the abomination's sharp teeth, sounding almost like… almost like hoarse laughter.

"You wretch!"

Hissing, Sunny caught the abomination's arm and twisted it. The familiar sound of snapping bones made a smile appear on his face, but a moment later, it was replaced by a pained grimace. Without skipping a beat after having his arm broken, the Scavenger sunk his teeth into Sunny's forearm, making more blood splatter on the rocks and more venom to enter his system.

"Goddammit!"

Livid, Sunny slapped the scrawny fiend across the head, sending him flying away. Even before the abomination landed, he was already closing in, prepared to annihilate the little bastard.

However…

The Scavenger just happened to fall on a very particular spot on the stone shore. His maimed hand ended up mere centimeters away from the hilt of Sin of Solace, which was still laying on the wet rocks.

The familiar voice laughed coldly.

"Well, would you look at that. What a turn of events…"

Before Sunny could reach the evil goblin, the creature hurriedly reached forward, grabbed the cursed sword, and swung it fiercely in Sunny's direction.

Chapter-958: A Series of Unfortunate Events

Sunny was too close to dodge the sudden strike, and the Scavenger was too quick to let him. Even though the Sin of Solace was longer than his whole body, the little fiend managed to swing it fast enough to leave the enemy no time to retreat.

'What… the hell…'

Knowing that the jade blade would easily cut him in half, or at least deliver a devastating wound, Sunny stared at the deadly white blur as it approached his torso. The time seemed to have slowed down.

'Is this a joke?'

Without having to do anything, he simply dismissed the Sin of Solace. Instead of the lethal touch of the perfect jade, his skin was washed by a scattering of white sparks.

The gremlin blinked in confusion and then awkwardly clenched his fists, as if trying to understand where the sword he had been just holding went. In the next moment, Sunny kicked him in the chest, sending the abomination flying again. Judging by the satisfying crunch he felt, the plate of bone armor on the Scavenger's chest was broken, and very likely a few of his ribs, too.

…Best of all, the damned sword finally stopped talking.

The wounded fiend bounced off the rocks, rolled a few meters, and then jumped to his feet. He did not seem too wounded to not be able to continue the fight, and more than eager to. However, his expression was slightly pained, and before doing anything, the gremlin hit his head a few times.

Sunny smiled.

It seemed that the annoying whispers had done a number on the Scavenger's mind, as well.

Now, all that was left was to finish the little menace off. Preferably, without losing any more pieces of flesh or getting even more poisoned than he already was…

Sunny just started to consider the best and most painful way to kill the Scavenger, but at that moment, a beautiful sound reached his ears.

It was the ringing of adamantine hooves that was approaching them from somewhere further up the road.

A nasty grin appeared on his face.

"Oh, you are so done now, bastard…"

Nightmare had obliterated his foes, and was coming back to assist his master.

The Scavenger seemed to understand the meaning of the ringing, too. He hesitated, staring at Sunny with an expression of burning hatred.

'Time to die.'

...Then, something changed. The expression on the ugly face of the vicious gremlin shifted, turning into one of indescribable fear. Moving his head, the little fiend stared at something behind Sunny's back. But there was nothing there…

Sunny wanted to scoff.

'Does this cretin really think that I will fall for the oldest trick in the book? I wrote that damn book, fool!'

…except for the ocean.

Then again... Sunny had already neglected to look behind himself once today. Which had led to his current pitiful state.

Suddenly, a chill ran down his spine.

With all four shadows wrapped around his body, Sunny could not see what was happening behind him. Gritting his teeth and knowing that he would regret it, he briefly glanced at the dark surface of the water.

The ocean was just as it had been a minute ago, and no horror was lunging at him from the cold waves.

'...No, no, no!'

By the time he looked back, the Scavenger was already gone.

Sunny did not know where the little bastard had disappeared to, but he could not see any trace of him. It was as if the Scavenger had never been here at all.

A stunned expression appeared on Sunny's face.

"Did… did he really… slip away from me? Again?!"

He opened his mouth in disbelief.

'...Damnation!'

Infuriated, Sunny kicked the nearest rock, and then spun, hoping against reason to find the hateful gremlin, somehow. He could not have gotten too far away, or hidden too well... there was no telling just what sort of powers the hateful abomination had absorbed by devouring countless Nightmare Creatures, though.

The Scavenger was thoroughly gone.

'I can't believe it! Curse that damned wretch!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny sent his shadow sense outward, reaching as far as he could in hope of discovering a hiding goblin.

He did not sense a scrawny shadow of the fiend anywhere…

…He did sense something else, however.

Suddenly, Sunny felt very cold.

Slowly turning around, he looked at the ocean again. The surface of the undulating waves was unchanged…

But somewhere beneath it, at the very edge of his senses, he could feel shadows moving across the ocean floor, drawing closer and closer.

Dozens… no, hundreds and hundreds of them, all heading toward a single point.

Him.

Backing away, Sunny gulped.

'Was… was the little wretch not faking, after all?'

What could have frightened the Scavenger so much that he had chosen to abandon his attempt at murdering Sunny?

'I… better not find out.'

Without a drop of essence in his cores and Black Venom coursing through his veins, Sunny did not feel particularly keen to learn what horrors were approaching him from beneath the waves.

He took a few more steps away, and then turned around, noticing a familiar shape.

Nightmare appeared in his view, galloping across the shattered surface of the highway. Following Sunny's command, the black stallion flashed past him without ever slowing down.

As he did, Sunny grabbed the hook of the saddle and pulled himself up, jumping on the back of the galloping steed.

Together, they dashed away from the water, heading north as fast as they could.

Throughout all of it, Sunny never looked back. The feeling of cold dread he felt from the approaching shadows…

It was eerily familiar.

'To hell with this… to hell with it all. This is too damn much for one godforsaken day!'

…The silhouette of the dark courser and his half-naked, battered rider disappeared behind a bend of the mountain slope. And just a few seconds later, the dark waters parted, and the first of the eerie visitors stepped from the water onto the shore.

Chapter-959: Lonesome Rider

Sunny was riding north through the bitter cold of the polar night, shivering in his raggedy, tattered bodysuit. The coastal highway stretched forward, strangely silent and empty. From time to time, he encountered bleeding carcasses of slain Nightmare Creatures that lay on the concrete, staring into the darkness with glassy eyes.

Those were the only signs left behind by the passing of the convoy. The rest of the abominations must have been pulled away by it, rushing in pursuit of the small column of vehicles. That gave Sunny a chance to catch his breath.

'Ah… I am tired…'

Now that the thrill of the battle was gone, he found himself in a somber mood. The cold, dark, and desolate landscape of the Antarctic Center was only adding to the gloom. Looking ahead, Sunny winced as he rocked in Nightmare's saddle. His wounds were hurting, and the lethal toxin was still trying to kill him from the inside.

Most people would have been dead already, but Blood Weave was slowly overcoming the black venom. Sunny was still bleeding from the torn bite wounds on his side and his forearm, though. His thumb was also a mess.

Since he had not encountered anything capable of making him bleed in a long while, that was a bit disconcerting. However, there was very little that Sunny could do. He had a mundane medkit stored inside the Covetous Coffer, but lacked the essence to summon it.

He could not summon an armor to protect himself from the cold for the same reason, as well. After being completely exhausted, essence was slow to return to the vast reservoirs of his cores.

What little he had received from dismissing the Sin of Solace was

almost instantly absorbed by his essence-starved body. Until his flesh was saturated at least to a small degree, he was not going to be able to summon any Memory.

It was not too bad, though. The more of the rejuvenating essence returned to his body, the better he was able to resist the cold, and the stronger Blood Weave became.

Slowly but surely, the feeling of sickening weakness permeating his whole being was receding.

Then, a small trickle of essence flowed into his cores.

'...Finally.'

Sunny commanded Nightmare to stop, and then dismounted. He knelt on the concrete for a minute or two, steadily breathing in and out and thinking about what Memory he should summon first. He was cold and required armor to protect him from both the elements and the enemies, but he also felt very uncomfortable without a weapon.

His wounds needed to be tended to, and the Memory of Ice was another worthy candidate.

Eventually, he sighed.

'Nightmare can be my weapon, for now.'

With that, Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffer. Opening the metal chest, he took out a medkit and awkwardly applied the clotting agent to his wounds, then plastered the sealing patches on top of them. After that, he reached deep into the cavernous storage space of the Coffer, searched for a bit, and pulled out a military coat.

Sunny stared at the brass buttons on the coat for a few moments, then put it on and raised the collar, hoping to save himself from the chilling wind.

'That should do it for now.'

Climbing back into the saddle, he sent his steed forward. Nightmare went slowly at first, so as not to disturb his master's wounds too

much.

They traveled in silence for some time. Eventually, Sunny recovered enough essence to summon another Memory, choosing the Cruel Sight this time. He had considered calling upon the Sin of Solace, but then decided against it. His mood was already dark, and listening to the damned sword was not going to improve it one bit.

Plus, with the Undying Chain gone, his mental defenses were not as good as they had been. Sunny scowled when he remembered the loss of the Transcendent armor, and hurried to throw the bitter thoughts out of his mind.

…It seemed that after subjecting him to all kinds of misfortune, [Fated] had finally decided to bestow Sunny with some luck. He had not encountered a single Nightmare Creature while traversing a long stretch of the highway.

Eventually, though, that luck was bound to run out.

Looking through the eyes of one of the shadows, which was scouting ahead, Sunny frowned. There was a dark mass of moving bodies blocking the road about a kilometer further north… the concrete was littered with corpses, and the abominations were feasting on the flesh of their fallen brethren, devouring them in a nauseating mess of squelching noises.

As Sunny looked past the morbid feast, his eyes darkened.

Soon, adamantine hooves rang on the concrete, and a nightmarish rider plunged into the mass of abominations. His steed stomped and tore them apart, and the shining spear of the rider himself flashed, making stark shadows dance on the surface of the highway, and streams of evaporating blood fountain into the cold air.

It did not take Sunny long to eviscerate the scavenging Nightmare Creatures. By then, he had recovered enough essence to channel it into the Cruel Sight, and by the time the short and brutal battle ended, he still had enough left to summon the Mantle of the Underworld.

Finally, he was not cold anymore.

…His mood, however, only grew darker.

Out there behind the mass of dead Nightmare Creatures — both those who had been killed before he arrived and those he killed himself — the familiar shape of one of the civilian transports could be seen on the road, standing motionlessly.

The lights of the vehicle were gone, and its frame was littered by deep gouges. Several large holes revealed the dark interior. Carcasses of the abominations were piled around the transport especially high, as if there had been a desperate fight around it.

Sunny sighed, then walked over and climbed inside, expecting to see the worst.

However, there were no human bodies littering the interior. There was no blood, either, just emptiness and shards of broken glass.

'...What the hell happened here?'

He lingered for a few moments, then returned outside and jumped into the saddle with a deep frown on his pale face.

Full of tension, Sunny sent Nightmare galloping north once again. This time, his posture was full of a sense of urgency.

Chapter-960: Erebus Field

About an hour later, Sunny reached the spot where the convoy was supposed to leave the highway and turn inland, scaling the mountains once again to eventually reach Erebus Field.

Of all the siege capitals in the Antarctic Center, only the first and the largest one — Falcon Scott — was situated near water. Even then, the actual port was a separate and solitary fortress, connected to the city above it by a network of industrial elevators. The rest of the human strongholds were built away from the ocean, on the outskirts of the mountains.

So, the last stretch of the way was going to take the convoy away from the coast… if they continued on the route Sunny had planned for them, of course.

He had killed a few more Nightmare creatures while trying to catch up with his men, and the corpses he had encountered seemed fresher as of late. From what Sunny could tell, the column was not too far ahead of him now. If he was lucky, he might even be able to rejoin the convoy before reaching Erebus Field.

The siege capital had to be surrounded by a ring of active battle engagements, so Sunny really hoped to accompany the refugees through that mess.

'No time to waste, then.'

He commanded Nightmare to turn east. Not long after they started to ascend the mountains, the snowfall seemed to pick up, making it harder to see.

There was something strange about that snow, though.

'What is this smell?'

Frowning, Sunny raised a hand and caught a few snowflakes on his palm. While he could see in the dark, differentiating colors that way was not his strongest suit. Sunny could instantly tell that something was wrong, though, because the white snowflakes did not contrast against the onyx metal of his gauntlet nearly as much as they should have.

In fact, they were not white at all.

He tilted his head a little, then smeared the snowflakes across his palm. What was left behind was a trail of black soot.

'...It's ash.'

Looking up at the sky, he scowled. The strong snowfall was no snowfall at all. Instead, it was raining ash. Countless grey flakes fell from high above, dancing in the wind as they slowly obscured the world in a thick fog.

'That can't be good.'

Full of bad premonitions, Sunny sent Nightmare into a gallop.

They moved deeper into the mountains, following the twisted road. By now, Blood Weave had mostly dealt with the toxin, and his wounds were already healing. His essence was slowly being replenished, as well, so overall, Sunny was in relatively good shape. Not enough to face something truly dreadful yet, but well on the way.

'Where the hell is my convoy?'

Just as he thought that, the scouting shadows noticed something ahead. Just short of the highest point of the nearest mountain pass, protected from the wind by tall cliffs, a group of battered vehicles was parked in a circle, with tired soldiers standing guard around it. He noticed Belle sitting on the roof of one of the transports, holding a sword in his hand.

A sense of profound relief grasped Sunny's heart.

'...They're fine!'

He let out a heavy breath, and asked Nightmare to go faster.

A few minutes later, the figure of an infernal rider clad in fearsome black armor entered the circle of light surrounding the parked convoy. The soldiers flinched and raised their rifles, aiming at the frightening apparition.

Sunny raised a hand.

"Don't shoot, bastards! What the hell is this, a mutiny?!"

The soldiers blinked a couple of times, staring at him with wide eyes. Then, someone yelled:

"It's the Captain! He's back!"

"Thank the gods!"

"Someone, tell the Devils!"

There was no need to inform the Irregulars, though. Belle was the first one to notice him, and just a few moments later, the whole cohort emerged from the camp to meet him.

Sunny jumped off the back of Nightmare, patted the stallion on the shoulder, and then dismissed him. Then, he turned to his people.

Kim was the first one to speak:

"Captain! You're alive! I… I mean, of course, you are. That rock of yours would have disappeared if you died…"

Luster grinned.

"See, I told you!"

Quentin glanced at him, then nodded with a smile.

"We shouldn't have doubted the Captain, indeed. But, to be honest, sir... none of us believed that you would manage to stop a Fallen Titan, let alone live to tell the tale. All by yourself, no less. That is simply incredible! How did you even survive?"

Sunny stared at him blankly for a few moments, then said evenly:

"I didn't."

As the members of the cohort looked at him with wide eyes, he scratched the back of his head and added:

"...Being dead was not all it's cracked up to be, though, so I walked it off. Anyway, I found the empty transport on the highway. What the hell happened?"

The Irregulars glanced at each other. Dorn sighed, then pointed to the convoy.

"It broke down in the middle of the road, sir. We had to stop and transfer the refugees to the other three vehicles. The abominations did not let us do it in peace, of course... it was a hell of a fight, but in the end, we managed to get everyone loaded up safely, broke through the crowd of Nightmare Creatures, and fled. We… lost a couple of soldiers, but none of the civilians were seriously hurt."

Sunny let out a heavy sigh.

'So, more people died.'

He closed his eyes for a moment.

"What is the situation now, then?"

Dorn's face darkened.

"The remaining transports are in bad shape and severely overloaded, sir. I don't think that they'll be able to travel for much longer."

That was to be expected. Sunny waved a hand.

"Are they going to make it to Erebus Field, at least? And, by the way, why did you stop? Is there a large number of Nightmare Creatures between us and the city gate?"

None of the members of the cohort answered… which was strange in and of itself.

What made Sunny really anxious, though, were the fallen expressions on their faces.

"...What?"

Dorn remained silent for a bit, then turned his head in the direction of the mountain pass.

"It would be easier if we just showed you, sir."

They walked through the camp, and then crested the slope of the pass. From there, Sunny had a clear view of Erebus field, which was supposed to be half a dozen kilometers further north.

…Supposed to.

With a frozen expression, Sunny looked through the falling ash at the dreadful sight below. His sunken eyes were hidden by deep, dark shadows.

'Curse it all.'

Erebus Field… was no more.

Chapter-961: Sand Castles

The dark skies were shrouded by a veil of slowly falling ash. Far below the mountain pass, illuminated by a foreboding red glow, a vast metropolis lay in ruins. The shattered buildings were drowning in rivers of lava, and a terrible conflagration was raging across the devastated land, devouring what little was left of the once-thriving city.

Above the scene of devastation, the dark shape of Mount Erebus was wreathed in smoke. A flood of molten rock was flowing down its slopes, glowing through the haze. The walls of the city were breached, and uncountable hordes of Nightmare Creatures were prowling in the ruins, some bathing in the flames, some avoiding it.

…Looking down with a dead expression on his pale, tired face, Sunny found himself momentarily unable to feel anything.

'Doesn't make any sense…'

Erebus Field was… had been one of the most prominent cities in Antarctica. Famous for its geothermal energy farms, fertile soil, and warmth, it had been home to tens of millions of people even before becoming an evacuation center.

The local government branch was supposed to have the volcano well under control. Even if all the safety systems they had in place were to suffer a cataclysmic failure, the city had possessed formidable fortifications long before being converted into a siege capital.

With those in place and a whole division of the First Army working on reinforcing the defensive infrastructure, as well as the presence of hundreds of Awakened and more than a few Masters, Erebus Field simply could not succumb to something as mundane as a volcanic eruption.

'How did this happen?'

Sunny was supposed to guide the convoy to this stronghold, deliver the refugees to the authorities, rendezvous with Davis and his cohort of Irregulars, and then resume acting in his usual capacity as the captain of a fast-response combat unit.

Instead, the city was gone, Davis and his people were nowhere to be found, and the responsibility of caring for the convoy of defenseless civilians was still pressing heavily on his shoulders. If anything, that weight had only become more burdensome.

He was at his wit's end.

With a sigh, Sunny rubbed his face, and then sat down on a nearby boulder. His eyes were still glued to the horrible scene below. He was simply unable to look away.

The members of the cohort stood awkwardly around him, keeping silent. Sunny remembered that he was meant to be projecting an image of confidence as their leader, but was too rattled and angry to care.

After a while, Belle cleared his throat.

"...We are awaiting your orders, sir."

Quentin glanced at the swordsman reproachfully, then sighed.

"None of us really knows what to do. The mood among the civilians is pretty dark, as well. Ah… everyone is a bit shaken, I think. We did check the maps, though. The next siege capital is to the north-east of here, over the mountains. About three hundred kilometers away.

Miss Beth and Professor Obel are currently searching for a good route…"

Sunny silently shook his head.

"...There's no point. Siege capitals seem to be crumbling like sand castles these days. Who says that the next one will still be there by the time we arrive? If we even make it…"

The Irregulars glanced at each other with uncomfortable expressions. After a poignant pause, Kim asked:

"What… what should we do, then? Sir?"

Sunny let out a heavy sigh, then looked north.

After a few moments of silence, he said:

"...Go to Falcon Scott. That is our best hope. Even if all other siege capitals fall, it will stand. It is the most fortified, and the First Army's presence is the strongest there. Most importantly… that is where Saint Tyris is. As long as she is defending the north, we'll be safe there."

Sunny did not add that if something capable of taking Sky Tide out appeared, all of them would be better off committing suicide. Once Saints started to die, mortals like them had no hope of making it out, really.

He also did not mention that there were another two thousand kilometers between them and Falcon Scott, twice as much as they had barely survived to get to Erebus Field from LO49. Everyone here knew that, since the cohort had started this damned campaign at the distant northern stronghold.

Returning to Falcon Scott would complete the calamitous circle.

Granted, the situation would be slightly different as they moved further north. Since that was where the First Army had first established its presence, the territories between Erebus Field and Falcon Scott were far better entrenched than the desolate regions in the south, where the army had come last.

There would be established evacuation corridors, or at least remnants of them. Supply depots, fortified outposts, well-maintained roads… perhaps they would even meet friendly forces on the way.

'Come to think of it, I should probably contact Army Command as soon as possible, to get detailed information about the big picture.'

The timing would be tricky, since the convoy was currently in a dire

situation, with numerous Nightmare Creatures flooding the area. Sending even one Irregular into the Dream Realm would diminish their ability to defend themselves, but it was better than remaining blind. His people needed sleep, anyway.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then said:

"Leave me for a bit. I need to think. Oh... make sure that the transports are as ready to move as they can be, while you're at it."

He doubted that it would be safe to remain near the fallen city for long.

The Irregulars nodded, then backed off and headed toward the convoy's temporary camp.

Left alone, Sunny forced himself to look away from the ruins of Erebus Field and stared up at the sky, which was dark and obscured by clouds of ash.

'...Damn it.'

The three remaining civilian transports were overloaded and on the verge of irrevocably breaking down. Military vehicles should still be operational, but Sergeant Gere had probably run out of ammunition by now.

'What the hell am I supposed to do?'

As Sunny watched the sky, a black dot appeared above him. At first, he thought that it was just another flake of ash, but the dot moved too swiftly to be one. It dove down, slowly growing as it drew closer.

A few seconds later, a black bird landed on a rock near him. It had glossy black feathers, smart round eyes, and a sharp beak that reminded him of Spire Messengers. With mild surprise, Sunny recognized it as a crow.

He knew that one, at least. Birds were a little bit less extinct than mammals, so even though they were a rare sight in the outskirts, there were some. They usually did not last long, though.

However…

'Why is there a crow in Antarctica?'

Just as he thought it, the crow opened its beak and cawed.

...Its caws sounded terribly like words.

"Sah-nee! Sah-nee!"

Chapter-962: Reaper's Crow

As soon as the strange crow appeared, Sunny was ready to kill it. Summoning the Moonlight Shard would have only taken a split second, and a swift strike of his armored fist was going to do the job just as well.

If it was an ordinary bird, of course. Which he seriously doubted.

He did not expect the crow to speak, though.

"Sah-nee! Sah-nee!"

'...Is it calling my name?'

Sunny temporarily postponed his plans of killing the crow and stared at it for a bit. The crow tilted its head and stared back.

"Sah-nee!"

He blinked, then shifted his vision and looked into the bird's soul. Sunny expected to see an orb of repulsive darkness, but what he saw instead were two radiant cores. The crow was an Awakened Monster… however, it was not a Nightmare Creature.

'Is it an Echo, or am I losing my mind? Again?'

He hesitated for a little while, then said cautiously:

"Yes, I am Sunny."

The bird jumped closer with a satisfied look, shook its entire body to get rid of flakes of ash clinging to the black feathers, and then cawed again.

"Jet! Jet!"

A spark of hope ignited in Sunny's heart. He studied the crow some more, then leaned closer and whispered:

"Did Master Jet send you?"

The small monster bobbed its head up and down several times.

"Jet! Send!"

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, inhaling deeply.

'So she did not forget about me after all, huh…'

The crow appeared to be Soul Reaper's Echo, which she had sent to find Sunny. It felt… nice… to be remembered. However, he was not sure how the black bird was supposed to help him, if that was Jet's intention at all.

Was it simply a messenger to deliver new orders? Someone to guide him to Davis and his cohort of elite assassins?

He hesitated for a moment.

"Why did Master Jet send you to find me?"

The small monster jumped a couple of times.

"Crow! Help!"

So it was not just a messenger. The Echo was meant to assist him, somehow. Sunny tried not to get too excited.

"How are you going to help me? Are you going to lead me to Davis?"

The black bird silently shook its head, making Sunny frown.

"Why not?"

The crow tilted its head.

"Da-vees! Dead…"

Sunny let out a heavy sigh. So, Pride was gone… his men probably

hadn't made it out of Erebus Field, either. He did not know the cold man too well, but the loss of a full cohort of Irregulars still hit him hard.

...Not to mention that Sunny's hopes of linking up with another powerful Master were crushed.

From what he knew, that was the first serious casualty the Irregulars had suffered from the start of the campaign. His information was outdated, though.

'Who says that any of them are still alive?'

The Irregulars, and especially their captains, were elites among elites. But with how unreasonably dreadful the Chain of Nightmares was turning out to be, at least in the Antarctic Center, there were no guarantees.

Hell, he himself had all but died just a few hours ago.

At least Soul Reaper was still out there, somewhere...

A dark grimace appeared on Sunny's face. Looking back at the small bird, he asked in a dubious tone:

"How are you supposed to help me, then?"

The crow flapped its wings.

"Crow! Show!"

Sunny frowned.

"Show what?"

The bird stared at him for a few moments, then cawed again:

"Crow! Show!"

Then, it added:

"Sah-nee! Follow!"

'It wants me to follow it?'

He did not have too much trust in the mere Awakened Monster's abilities, but if Master Jet had sent it, then there had to be a good reason. In any case, Sunny did not have too many choices.

Although he did not want to think it aloud, the convoy's situation was more or less hopeless. With failing vehicles and an ocean of Nightmare Creatures surrounding them, the chances that he would be able to keep the refugees alive were not too high.

Sunny sighed, then nodded.

"Alright. We'll follow you. Just give me a bit of time to get my people on the road."

The crow stared at him for a bit, then flopped its wings again.

"Hur-ry!"

'You don't need to remind me…'

Standing up, Sunny descended toward the convoy's camp and ordered everyone to prepare for departure. Soon, the column of vehicles left its temporary shelter and followed a narrow mountain road that circled the former Erebus Field from a good distance.

The crow flew above them, guiding the convoy deeper into the mountains. The bird had turned out to be an amazing scout. Not only was it able to notice swarms of Nightmare Creatures from high above long before they could threaten the column, but it was also smart enough to lead Sunny and his people around the prowling abominations.

After about an hour of tense, but uneventful driving, they left the sight of the destroyed city behind. The scene of devastation was now obscured by the slopes and peaks, but the plume of smoke rising from the crater of Mount Erebus and the angry orange glow of the burning stronghold could still be seen.

The crow guided the convoy to a wide crossroad, and then dove down, landing near a small structure standing at the side of it.

The convoy came to a halt, the civilian transports looking like they might not ever be able to get their engines running again. Sparing them an uneasy glance, Sunny jumped down from the roof of the Rhino and approached the structure.

It seemed freshly built, and was most likely constructed by the First Army just a month or two ago. He had no idea what its purpose was, though.

Uncertain, Sunny glanced at the black bird, who looked very proud of itself.

"What am I supposed to do with that?"

The crow tilted its head.

"Door! Open!"

'Oh.'

Despite its small size, the structure had actual blast doors blocking its entrance. The gate was large enough to be rammed by the Rhino, but of course, Sunny was not going to order Luster to do something that stupid.

He briefly thought about cutting through the blast doors with the Cruel Sight, but then shook his head with a roll of eyes, walked over to a small panel at the side of the gate, and placed his palm on it. The panel lit up, and then, a mechanical voice came from the in-built dynamics.

"Captain Sunless. Verified. Sufficient clearance."

The blast doors opened, revealing the entrance to a wide tunnel.

'Oh. Hell. No.'

Sunny remained motionless for a while, cursing his fate, then reluctantly sent one of his shadows into the tunnel.

Despite his newly established aversion to tunnels of all kinds, that one turned out to be rather short, leading to a vast underground

chamber. It was rectangular in shape, and large enough for the several convoy's the size of the one Sunny was leading to take shelter inside.

'It's a hidden supply depot… a big one, at th… huh?'

Sunny's eyes widened.

Inside the underground garage…

Rows and rows of pristine military vehicles stood, ready to be powered up and armed with full compliments of heavy assault weapons.

Chapter-963: Supply Depot

Sunny remained motionless for a while, until eventually there was a sound of footsteps approaching him. Turning around, he looked at Sergeant Gere with a blank expression.

The soldier tensed, habitually expecting dreadful news.

"...What? What's in there?"

Sunny lingered for a bit, then simply shook his head.

"Order the convoy to drive inside. You'll see soon enough."

Before too long, the column of battered vehicles drove past him, disappearing into the dark tunnel. Once they were all inside, Sunny glanced at the falling ash one last time, then walked into the darkness himself. The blast doors closed behind him with a reverberating hum, cutting off the bitter cold and the chilling wind of the polar night.

Just before the two plates of armored alloy touched, Master Jet's crow flew between them and landed on Sunny's shoulder. The bird glanced into the tunnel with curiosity, then stared at him and cawed a couple of times. For a change, those were simple caws, and not mangled words of the human language.

A pale smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"...Yeah. Good job."

With that, he walked down the tunnel, soon reaching the underground garage.

The convoy was parked in the empty corner of the vast chamber, and excited soldiers were already moving around the pristine military vehicles, evaluating their state. Someone else was busy opening alloy

crates that were stacked along one of the walls, full of all kinds of supplies.

The depot was brightly illuminated by powerful light fixtures, which had come online as soon as Sunny opened the gate using his command authority. The ventilation systems were also online, filling the underground space with the familiar, calming smell of artificially cleaned air.

Sunny breathed in deeply and waited for Sergeant Gere to approach him.

"So? How is it?"

The soldier smiled, which made Sunny realize that he had never seen the dependable sergeant do that before.

"...It's nothing short of amazing, sir. This is a divisional field resupply station, from what I can tell. It's meant to replenish the expended resources of an entire division between battles, if there's no convenient opportunity to reach a fortified stronghold or if the supply lines are cut. There's enough here to support the deployment of thousands of soldiers."

He paused for a moment, and then pointed at the rows of vehicles.

"We have not assessed the full inventory yet, but you can already see that this is far more than we need. There are different types of machines, too, from armored personnel carriers to assault vehicles and light scouts. Hell, there's even a dozen MWPs here, with enough ammunition to load all their armaments."

Sunny glanced at the towering shapes of the mobile war platforms standing near the back wall. These giant humanoid robots were about six meters tall, on the smaller side compared to their larger cousins, but they still packed a heavy punch.

Samara's powerful rifle had been meant to serve as a light weapon for one of these formidable machines, but was later refitted to be used by the Awakened sharpshooter.

The presence of MWPs was a pleasant surprise. Mundane soldiers

were somewhat capable of facing Dormant Nightmare Creatures, but had troubles dealing with the Awakened ones, even with the help of exoskeleton armor suits. The fierce arsenal of guns and launchers installed on the war platforms, however, made them destructive enough to accomplish that task.

There was just one problem…

Sunny gave Sergeant Gere a dubious look.

"Do we even have anyone capable of piloting these things?"

The soldier coughed and awkwardly scratched the back of his head.

"Oh… no, not really."

He remained silent for a few moments, then smiled again.

"Still. There's also ammunition for our turrets, as well as food, medicine, spare fuel cells, necessities… basically, all that the refugees need. We can even arm them all, if that is what you want to do. Those vehicles that we can drive are much faster than the civilian transports, too, have better armor, and can navigate more difficult terrain.

Not to mention that there's more of them than we can possibly use, or everything, really. The infrastructure between here and Falcon Scott is also much better developed, so… I think both our speed and defensive capabilities are going to increase tremendously."

Sunny nodded, then glanced briefly at the crow, who had left his shoulder and was now perching on one of the beams of the support framework near the ceiling of the depot, looking down at the hustling humans with a curious expression.

"...Good. We'll be staying here for a couple of days, to let the people rest and give us time to get acquainted with all these shiny new toys. Make sure that everyone has a warm meal and a comfortable place to sleep."

With that, he left Gere to figure out the logistics of settling in hundreds of refugees in an underground storage bunker that was not

really meant to be used for such a purpose, and tiredly walked toward the Rhino.

There were many robust vehicles in the supply depot, but he did not see anything that could compare to his personal ride. The fearsome APC was still the best there was.

'...I need some rest myself.'

Climbing inside the Rhino, he exchanged a few words with Professor Obel, then told Luster to figure out the sleep schedule between the Irregulars and bring him some news from the Dream Realm by the morning… or whatever it was going to be once he woke up.

Then, Sunny took off his military coat and dismissed the Mantle of the Underworld, which had been hidden beneath.

At that moment, Beth was approaching him to say something, but lingered after noticing the dried blood and sealing patches glued to his skin. She paled a little, remained silent for a few moments, and then forced out an unconvincingly sarcastic remark:

"So… you do bleed, after all."

Sunny looked down at his battered body, and smiled.

"Only on special occasions."

With that, he turned away, climbed into a sleeping niche, and closed his eyes in utter exhaustion.

'That… was a long, dreadful, utterly terrible day…'

It did end on a positive note, though. That, at least, was something to be thankful about.

Chapter-964: Proof of Competence

Shockingly, nothing disastrous happened while Sunny slept. A Gate did not open in the middle of the supply depot, and a stray titan did not break through the blast doors to devour every last person under his protection. Somehow, the world did not collapse.

Instead, Sunny woke up to the sounds of peaceful conversation and the smell of cooking food. He remained still for a few minutes, then climbed out of the sleeping niche, checked on his healing wounds, and summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud to cover his bruised body.

In the lounge area of the Rhino, several members of his cohort were eating a hearty breakfast. Surprisingly, Professor Obel was the one cooking, masterfully using rations scavenged from the depot supplies to create something that smelled unexpectedly tasty.

Walking closer, Sunny heard Luster speaking with surprising enthusiasm:

"...amazing! How did you even make this?"

The old man chuckled.

"Ah, food was much more scarce during my youth than it is now. Ancient relics like me all know how to make a feast out of nothing, young man."

Noticing Sunny, Luster pointed to his plate.

"Captain! You have to try it!"

He stuffed his mouth with something that looked like vegetable lasagna — which was rather strange, considering that military rations

did not include fresh vegetables — and smiled.

"Oh! And we are also flush with water again. Shower is back online!"

That… was a piece of surprisingly good news. The Rhino had a very robust water filtration system, but they had to start rationing it many days ago. The thought of an actual hot shower made Sunny smile.

He sat down and curiously tasted Professor Obel's cooking. It was, indeed, rather delicious.

Noticing his reaction, the old man chuckled.

"Everything potslop. That's what we used to call this Frankenstein of a dish, back in my days. Times may change, but some things always remain the same."

Sunny stared at his plate, and then frowned.

"...What's a frankenstein?"

Professor Obel gave him an amused look.

"Well… it is a fictional monster. A sort of jigsaw corpse reanimated by a troubled scientist. Actually, perhaps it was the scientist who was the monster."

Sunny gave him an understanding nod.

"Ah, I see. A jigsaw corpse… I think I fought one of those before. Although it was more of a mountain of bones. I guess you could make bone broth out of that?"

'The Professor is really being too harsh on himself. His cooking does not taste like corpse meat at all. I should know!'

Ignoring the strange glance directed at him, Sunny shrugged and concentrated on his food.

The first shift of the Irregulars sent into the Dream Realm was not back yet, so there was nothing pressing for him to do. Sunny finished his meal in peace, then chatted with his men for a bit. One after

another, they left to resume their work on preparing the convoy for eventual departure. Beth was probably dealing with the refugees, so she was nowhere to be seen.

That left Sunny and Professor Obel alone with each other.

The old man studied his face for a few moments, and then suddenly asked:

"How are you holding up, Captain Sunless?"

Sunny looked at him in confusion.

"Me? Fine… I guess."

Professor Obel sighed.

"It must be hard, especially for someone so young. In this dire situation, you are responsible for the well-being of hundreds of people… but there is no one caring for your own wellness. So, that was why I asked. How are you, really?"

Sunny wanted to retort, but then thought for a while, and shrugged.

"Actually, it's a bit strange. Everyone here is fighting tooth and nail to survive. Most of them have no control over whether they live or die. Every minute might be their last… and they all know it, too. But not me. I am more or less safe.

Unless I actively try to do something stupid, I will most likely survive even if the whole convoy is obliterated. My Aspect makes it really easy for me to escape most dangers, you know."

He hesitated, and then added with some uncertainty:

"So, the mental strain that I experience should be far less than that of all these vulnerable people. But… for some reason, it does not feel that way. I should not really care how many strangers die around me, but I do. It's like a mental hex, really, me caring… actually, it's exactly like that. Especially because I do find myself doing stupid things to prevent them from dying."

Sunny frowned.

'...Wait. I am not really under a hex that compels me to defend this damned convoy, am I?'

Professor Obel suddenly laughed.

"A mental hex… that is a very unique way to put it. Isn't it normal for people to care about each other?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"No? Of course not."

He shook his head, then added with slight bewilderment:

"No one ever cared about me… until I became powerful, and thus useful. That's just how things work."

Sunny had been alone for most of his life. True, after becoming infected by the Spell, he had made several good friends… but he had no illusions about the reason for the bond between them. If he had been someone weak and useless, people like Effie, Kai… even Nephis and Cassie… would have never wasted time on becoming close with him.

And why should they?

Well, there was Rain, too… but that was different. She was family, not a random stranger.

Professor Obel let out a sad sigh and remained silent for a while. Eventually, he asked:

"So why do you think you care about whether the refugees and the mundane soldiers survive? Why are you risking yourself to help them?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"That… I am actually not too sure myself. Ah, maybe it's pride. These people are under my protection, so their deaths would demonstrate

my incompetence. Makes sense… it is weird, though. I never really claimed to have something as useless as pride."

The old man looked at him with a strange expression, then shook his head.

"Do you want to know what I think?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Yes?"

Professor Obel smiled.

"I think that you are giving yourself too little credit, young man."

Sunny stared at him in confusion.

'Huh?'

"What is that supposed to mean?"

The old man chuckled.

"Ah, don't mind me. It's just an old man's rumblings… maybe you'll understand when you're my age. Until then, please keep caring for these poor people, stupid as it might seem. There's this one truth that I've learned after long decades, you see… humanity would have never survived without a bit of stupidity…"

Chapter-965: New Plan

The news Sunny's people brought from the Dream Realm was both disturbing and ominous. There was a wealth of updates on the state of affairs in Antarctica, but all of it was overshadowed by one simple fact.

Army Command was seemingly unaware that Erebus Field had been wiped off the map. They knew that something had happened, but it was the members of his cohort who brought the first-hand account of the devastation to the Dream Realm, prompting an intense reaction.

That did not bode well for Sunny. Either the siege capital had been destroyed very recently, or the First Army was in much worse shape than he had thought. In any case, the situation meant that the validity of all information received from Army Command had to be taken with a grain of salt from now on. Things were changing too fast for their compromised communication network to keep up.

…It was just as well. He had already decided to proceed to Falcon Scott, bypassing the less impregnable siege capitals. It was going to be their eventual destination, regardless — that much was clear.

It seemed that the situation in East Antarctica was not as dire as the utter disaster of the Antarctic Center, which had much fewer soldiers and less resources allocated to it due to the smaller territory and population, but was being hit by the Chain of Nightmares much harder, for some reason.

As a result, the previous plan was scrapped, and hastily replaced with a new one. The incoming naval convoys were going to be redirected to start ferrying the civilian population and the army contingent over the strait, to the larger and better protected eastern landmass. Falcon Scott would become the staging ground for the relocation, as well as humanity's last stronghold in the region.

The First Army was abandoning the Antarctic Center entirely.

…So, there was no point in seeking shelter in any other siege capital, even if some of them could still be holding out. All divisions were going to retreat to Falcon Scott eventually, anyway, taking the civilians with them.

Sunny sighed.

'Sounds like a plan.'

A plan that could very well end in disaster, but a solid one, nevertheless. Army Command was not entirely clueless… Master Jet had to have known about Erebus Field to send her crow after him, after all, so it was not like the entire leadership was compromised.

It was just that there were gaps in the flow of information between the headquarters and the people on the frontlines, which was detrimental, but inevitable for as long as the Winter Beast still lived.

As much as it pained Sunny to admit it, everyone was doing their best in a terrible situation. There was no one to blame. It was just that he personally had the misfortune of finding himself on the more dreadful end of the terribleness spectrum, as far as circumstances were concerned.

'...Damn it.'

Shaking his head, he climbed on the roof of the Rhino and silently observed the flurry of activity inside the resupply station. Everyone was busy. Even the refugees were helping load cargo into the vehicles Sergeant Gere had chosen to commandeer.

The crow flew off its perch under the ceiling and landed near him, snuggling close to stare at the humans together. Sunny glanced at the black bird incredulously.

"What do you think? Will we make it?"

The small monster glanced at him in confusion and cawed a couple of times.

Sunny scoffed.

"Figures. You're just an Echo. Oh... what do I call you, anyway?"

The bird tilted its head.

"Crro! Crro!"

Sunny smiled.

"Your name is Crow Crow? Huh… well, I'll just call you Crow, if you don't mind."

The bird stared at him for a few moments, then cawed and flew away.

Shaking his head, Sunny shifted his perception and concentrated on the view of the outside. One of his shadows remained there to watch the approach to the depot, hiding in the darkness.

The ash was still falling from the sky, obscuring the stars and the crimson flames of the aurora. Black soot was marring the white surface of the snow, turning it into a dirty grey sludge. The silhouettes of the nearby mountains were outlined by the red glow that emanated from the sea of lava, making the whole landscape seem eerie and infernal.

'...This entire continent is way too weird. It's like I never left the Dream Realm.'

As Sunny thought that, a slight movement attracted his attention. Soon, a flicker of light appeared in the distance, and then, a whole river of them showed itself from behind the cold slopes. The stream of light flowed down the mountain road, heading straight for the entrance to the supply depot.

His face fell.

'Ah, not again…'

Out there in the ashen wilderness, a large column of battered vehicles was rolling down the road, escorted by scores of disheveled soldiers.

Some were on foot, some moved with the help of powered exoskeleton armor suits, aiming into the darkness with their high-caliber rifles.

The haunted expressions, the lightless eyes, the faces of frightened refugees behind the cracked windows of makeshift transports… all of it was too familiar.

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

'Those would be the survivors of Erebus Field, then.'

With an exasperated sigh, he shook his head, and then jumped off the roof of the Rhino.

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Outside the underground depot, a long column of vehicles had come to a halt. The soldiers were running to assume defensive positions, and their leaders were barking orders to get them moving faster.

In front of the locked blast doors, several people stood with tired expressions on their faces. One of them, an Awakened woman in a tattered robe, was cursing as she placed her hand on the security panel over and over again.

The mechanical voice was not amused.

"Lieu… lieu… lieutenant Carin. Verified. Insufficient clearance. Access denied."

"Goddammit!"

The woman slammed her fist into the panel, then glanced at one of the other officers near her. After a few seconds of somber silence, she asked:

"Do you think one of you guys can hack it? Or are we going to have to blow through this damned gate?"

The man hesitated for a while, then opened his mouth to say something.

Before he could, however, there was a reverberating hum, and the blast doors suddenly slid to the sides, revealing the entrance of a dark tunnel… and a very pale, very ominous-looking young man in black garments standing there with a strange, eerily calm expression on his face.

"I would appreciate it if you don't try to blow up my gate, actually."

The Awakened woman jumped back with a yelp and outstretched one hand to summon a weapon.

"W—what the hell are you?!"

The pale stranger tilted his head a little and stared at her with his cold, dark eyes.

"...Master Sunless, First Irregular Company."

With that, he looked past the officers, at the long column of vehicles behind them. Suddenly, the young man's face grew a little lively.

The Awakened woman let out a relieved sigh.

"Oh, you're human... wait. Master?"

Glancing back at her, the young man suddenly smiled.

"Say, you wouldn't happen to have a few MWP pilots in that convoy of yours, would you?"

Chapter-966: Reinforcements

The new arrivals did, indeed, turn out to be one of the splinter groups of the Erebus Field survivors. There were many more people in their caravan than in Sunny's caravan, but none of the soldiers held a higher military rank than him, the most senior officer among them being an Awakened lieutenant named Carin.

Needless to say, there were no Masters among them, either.

So… ironically, he ended up being in charge again.

Sunny had been responsible for six Awakened and two civilians after leaving Lo49, which suited him fine. Then, more than three hundred refugees and several dozens of mundane soldiers joined them.

Those numbers seemed like a joke now.

After the Erebus Field survivors joined his group, Sunny found himself in command of a significantly larger force. There were more than four thousand civilians currently sheltered in the crowded resupply station, as well as five hundred mundane soldiers. Lieutenant Carin had many Awakened warriors with her, as well as four new Sleepers.

Sunny sent the latter to their nameless counterpart, placing the young man in charge.

The guy had turned out to be quite resourceful, and Belle's mentorship seemed to be bearing fruit. Not to mention that his core was close to being saturated already.

In the end, there were now three full Awakened cohorts — and a half — under Sunny's command. There were also twelve powerful MWPs being piloted by mundane specialists and more than enough powered armor suits for the soldiers, which drastically increased the caravan's

defensive ability.

The vast supply reserves of the underground station suddenly did not look so inexhaustible anymore.

'Ah, this is going to be a headache…'

Studying the crowded depot, Sunny grimaced. The increase in power and in the number of tools at his disposal was welcome, but he would have to rethink his entire strategy as to how to traverse the two thousand kilometers separating them from Falcon Scott.

Before, Sunny had mostly put his efforts into avoiding combat engagements, meticulously circumventing Nightmare Creatures and only attacking those swarms that could not be bypassed. But with a caravan this large, that was not an option anymore. There was just no way to perfectly hide so many people.

Luckily, the caliber of threats they could take on also increased. With several cohorts of Awakened and a small army under his command, Sunny would be able to simply roll over many swarms, maybe even cut a path through the weaker hordes of abominations.

But all of that required a lot of mental adjustment, and even more work for his shadows. His map would also have to be updated to account for the changes in the caravan's composition.

'Oh, well. No sleep for me today, it seems.'

Walking toward the Rhino with a slightly exasperated expression, Sunny couldn't help but hear bits and pieces of the conversations the new arrivals were having with the members of the initial convoy.

"...I don't think any of us can survive."

"What's that? Cheer up, man. The Devil himself is with us, so who can be against us?"

"Oh… so it's that Master Sunless? No wonder the name sounded familiar. I heard about him, even though he was assigned to a different division. Still… what can one man do?"

"Damn… what can't he do? I swear to the dead gods, I saw him kill a hundred Nightmare Creatures with a single arrow once. There was also this one time when he summoned a whole damn bridge out of thin air for us to cross a canyon. Hell, the man fought a titan to a stalemate just yesterday… actually, I am not even sure that it was a stalemate.

All I know is that the Captain came back, but the titan did not…"

A corner of Sunny's mouth twisted up a little. His people were surely fond of embellishing his deeds, but he was not going to intervene. At this point, anything that raised morale of the troops was a good thing, even if it was not entirely based in truth.

He climbed into the Rhino and walked to the command suite, studying the new faces among the usual participants of strategic meetings. Sunny already knew Awakened Carin, but the two mundane officers she brought for debriefing were strangers.

"Let's start."

What he wanted to know first was how Erebus Field had fallen.

The truth... turned out to be as disturbing as Sunny had thought.

As he had suspected, the city had been destroyed very recently. In fact, it had just happened two days ago, around the time he and his people were deciding to try their luck by charging the coastal highway.

The main culprit of the disaster was also familiar… it was none other than his good friend Goliath.

'...Damned bastard.'

After missing for the better half of two months, the stone giant had suddenly emerged from within Mount Erebus, breaking through one of its slopes and causing a whole side of the volcano to collapse. The resulting conflagration and the flood of lava had little chance of destroying a city that had been well-fortified against exactly such an event, even if on a smaller scale…

However, that was before the towering colossus smashed through the city defenses, destroying the grandiose magma barriers, drain vents, and most other contingencies the government had put in place.

With the perimeter of the siege capital breached, a titan rampaging on its periphery, rivers of lava flowing through the broken barriers, and hordes of Nightmare Creatures using the chance to get inside, there had been nothing that the First Army division stationed at Erebus Field could do to stop the cataclysmic assault.

The few Masters of the accompanying Awakened force had joined forces to stall Goliath for as long as they could while the soldiers desperately tried to evacuate the civilians.

That was probably where Davis and his cohort of Irregulars had perished.

Lieutenant Carin did not know how many people had made it out of that hell in the end, but judging by her expression, it was probably much less than the total population of the city. The last thing she had witnessed before leading the caravan away was the colossal figure of Goliath, turned incandescent from bathing in the molten lava, plunging into the ocean and disappearing under the dark waves.

From where the titan had emerged the next day to attack Sunny's convoy.

…After Carin was finished speaking, a somber silence settled inside the Rhino. No one knew what exactly to say.

Eventually, Sunny sighed.

'Their nightmare is over…'

Chapter-967: Smooth Ride

Two days later, they abandoned the resupply station. The underground depot was left almost empty, since Sunny had decided to take everything they could on the road. Not all the vehicles were loaded to capacity, but even if there was just a driver and a shooter inside, every last one was commandeered and put to good use.

Only the discarded civilian transports and those of the Erebus Field vehicles that were too damaged to remain reliable were left behind.

Nightmare, Abomination, and Blackie moved at the front of the caravan, serving as its vanguard. The Rhino was still at the head, but it was now flanked by two lumbering MWPs, both of them constantly scanning the surroundings with their high-tech optical arrays.

Behind them, the long column of vehicles stretched for more than a kilometer on the mountain road. The remaining ten MWPs and two dozen Awakened were spread along its length, meant to protect the caravan in case of an attack from the flanks. Most of the vehicles were armed, and there were personnel carriers with full companies of mechanized infantry placed strategically among the refugee transports.

All in all, the caravan looked like a big, delicious target for Nightmare Creatures… but also one that would be extremely hard to swallow.

'I'd like to see the bastards try… uh, actually, scratch that. I'd rather not…'

Sunny was positioned on the roof of the Rhino, wearing his military coat over the Mantle of the Underworld. With the elemental resistance of the onyx armor and the Memory of Ice slotted into it, he was more or less immune to mundane cold, so the chilling nature of the polar night was not bothering him too much. The falling ash,

though, was still irritating.

Hopefully, they would leave the area near Mount Erebus soon.

The wind was blowing in the other direction, which not only moved the clouds of ash away from the caravan, but would also make it harder for those Nightmare Creatures that relied on their sense of smell to detect the approaching humans far in advance.

Still, he had no illusions that theirs would be a smooth ride.

Luckily, Sunny was extremely well-suited to serve as a guide. He had updated his map with as many details as he could and planned multiple suitable routes for the caravan. With his shadows scouting ahead and the crow keeping an eye out for hidden threats from high above, he was as informed about the surrounding area and the enemy movements as anyone could be.

The shadows scouted most enemies long before the long column of vehicles approached, and the black bird with its magical eyes was able to notice anything that they missed. The combination was extremely effective.

Information was the lifeblood of warfare, so Sunny had a considerable advantage. He was going to use it well to navigate the treacherous expanse of the Antarctic Center and reach Falcon Scott unscathed.

His task had grown much harder because of the sheer size of the caravan, but on the other hand, the land they were traversing was also different from the complicated network of decrepit old roads in the south. The infrastructure between Erebus Field and the northern parts of the landmass had indeed been much more developed, and then expanded on by the First Army in the recent months to boot.

Plus, they were moving away from the area that had been affected by the earthquake the most, so there were fewer signs of destruction and obstacles on their path the further north the caravan drove.

The roads were wider and better preserved, the terrain was less rugged. It was not as flat and straight as the coastal highway, of

course, but Sunny felt reluctant to return to the ocean just yet. Even if he did, it would only be to bypass an especially difficult region and then swiftly return to the mountains.

'...Or not at all.'

At first, there were not too many Nightmare Creatures in the way — most of them that had been in the immediate area probably migrated to the ruins of Erebus Field and were yet to return. What little resistance the caravan did meet was promptly obliterated by the Irregulars and Carin's Awakened.

For the first day or so, the MWPs did not even have to fire a single shot.

The next one brought more enemies with it, however. The caravan did not stop, with drivers working in shifts to keep it moving, so the destroyed city was now far behind them. Here, the abominations ran free, and plenty of them caught the scent of the large group of refugees.

Swarm after swarm assaulted the column of vehicles, shattering against its defenses. The devastating barrage of bullets tore them apart, accompanied by arrows and magical projectiles tossed by the Awakened.

The MWPs let their monstrous Gatling guns and heavy mass drivers cut large swaths through the mass of abominations, sending swarms of explosive missiles flying from the mounted launchers from time to time.

If the Nightmare Creatures got too close, destructive flamethrowers and Awakened fighters made short work of them. If there were Fallen or Corrupted abominations among the swarms, Sunny and Nightmare charged forward before the creatures could do any harm to the refugees.

With Sergeant Gere running logistics and organizing the mundane soldiers, Lieutenant Carin commanding most of the Awakened, and Beth caring for the needs of the civilians… that was pretty much all he had to do.

Dealing with the various powers Nightmare Creatures possessed was a bit challenging, but mostly, Sunny found himself unexpectedly free. Which was good, since he had plenty of time to address his tasks as the strategist and guide of the caravan, but still…

'Weird. Am I actually… a little bored?'

Looking at the remains of another swarm that the column had all but rolled over, Sunny scratched the back of his head. He knew, of course, that this rate of progress would not continue indefinitely… in fact, they were bound to get bloodied as soon as he failed to lead the caravan past a real horde of Nightmare Creatures, which was getting harder and harder to do.

That had not happened yet, though.

'Am I suddenly very lucky, or has my luck just been really terrible up until now?'

Sunny pondered about it for a few moments, and decided that it was probably both.

The question was how long would the stretch of good fortune last…

Chapter-968: Shifting Scales

A few more days passed in the clamor of firing armaments and frenzied howls of dying Nightmare Creatures. The dark landscape of the Antarctic Center flowed past the incessantly moving caravan, with the starlight and the undulating visage of Aurora Australis finally appearing from behind the clouds of ash, only to be devoured by the veil of snow.

The blizzard was picking up again, making Sunny wonder if he was going to meet the second titan raging in the region. He was not very enthused to make its acquaintance, to say the least.

The journey… was a strange one. Sunny was used to things going south fast, but the situation of the caravan was very different. Instead of something dreadful and devastating happening all at once, their circumstances were growing slightly more dire with every hour, bringing them closer to annihilation little by little.

The confident pace the caravan had established after leaving the resupply station was long gone. Instead of rare skirmishes with weak swarms of Nightmare Creatures, they were now embroiled in a nearly unstoppable battle with the sea abominations flooding the northern reaches of the Antarctic Center.

The pressure on the Awakened and the MWP pilots had increased tremendously, and the infantrymen had to bloody their bayonets on more than one occasion already.

Worst of all was the inescapable corrosion that the multitude of Gates were exerting on their tech. The military vehicles were shielded from the detrimental effects of the Call to some degree, but very few had the same rare and expensive modifications as the Rhino had. They were managing for now, but there was no telling how long it would last.

The problems were mounting.

…The casualties were mounting, too.

During the harrowing push to Erebus Field, Sunny had lost only a handful of people to the vagaries of the Spell and the deadly crucible of battle. Their losses were few enough to consider each one a poignant event.

It was not so much for the current step of the journey. The caravan had grown too much, and the combat engagements they had to fight were too frequent and intensive to avoid losing soldiers. The attrition rate was not terrible, and in fact remained admirably low, but it seemed that every time Gere contacted him to give an update on the state of the column, more names had to be added to the list.

Sunny was strangely bothered by it. He had thought that with the drastic increase in numbers, the loss of individual soldiers would not affect him too much, especially if the casualties were below expected. He had also thought that he would eventually grow numb to the news of people under his command dying.

But he had not.

The more of his soldiers died — no matter how few — the more bitter and angry he felt. However, the most powerful emotion he experienced was rather unexpected…

Indignation.

Sunny felt indignant about the fact that he was forced to watch good men and women die, to see mundane humans putting their lives on the line to protect the defenseless refugees… all the while the truly powerful ones were nowhere to be seen, embroiled into their own internal strife.

'Damned bastards…'

Maybe he wasn't cut out to be a leader, after all.

…That was not to say that Sunny was ineffective. On the contrary, he was doing a good job of leading the caravan and pretending to be an

intrepid commander. However, it was all alien to him. It was something he was doing because the circumstances had forced him to, not because he wished to play that role.

Living alone in the dark had been much more comfortable.

'Ah, good old times.'

There was another strange thing about the caravan's advance north… something that Sunny should have expected, but nevertheless failed to account for.

Despite the slow attrition, the number of people under his command was not reducing. Instead, it was growing… ballooning, even. The further they drove, the larger the caravan became.

There were other large groups of people who had escaped from Erebus Field, squads of soldiers that had lost contact with Army Command due to the blizzard, and evacuation convoys that had gotten stuck in a limbo after their destination was destroyed. All of them were happy to see a well-organized force moving north, especially since it was led by a Master.

So, they joined the caravan. Sunny could not really turn the stragglers away, and at that point, there was no point to.

So, the four thousand refugees under his protection turned to five, then six, and then twelve. The five hundred soldiers turned into more than a thousand. The three cohorts of Awakened swelled to seven, and there were now two auxiliary Sleeper cohorts instead of one.

There were many more vehicles, too. The bloated caravan stretched for two kilometers now, and showed no signs of stopping the rapid expansion. Looking at it, Sunny couldn't help but shake his head.

'That's just a recipe for disaster...'

At this rate, he was going to end up leading a whole division by the time they reached Falcon Scott. If they reached it.

Hopefully, he would stumble on a colonel or two and push the command responsibility on them soon. If the colonel was not an idiot,

of course.

…Sunny had just finished dealing with a very nasty Fallen Demon laying in ambush in the path of the caravan and returned to the head of the column. As soon as he appeared from the shadows on the roof of the Rhino, the Crow flew down and perched on his shoulder, his feathers ruffled and covered with snowflakes.

He glanced at the miserable bird and sighed.

"What? Did you see something?"

The small monster bobbed its head.

"Crro! Saw!"

Sunny waited for the Crow to continue, knowing that it had to be bad for the Echo to seek him out. The flying monster cawed again:

"Hord! Hord!"

With that, the bird turned its head and pointed its beak in a certain direction.

'Curse it.'

There was a horde of Nightmare Creatures ahead… one that the Crow did not know how to avoid. Finally, Sunny's fears had come true.

He hurriedly sent the shadow that was closest to the direction where the Echo was pointing to forward. It had already been scouting far ahead, but apparently not far enough.

Soon, Sunny's eyes narrowed.

There was indeed a vast horde of abominations, and bypassing it was out of the question.

Well… unless he used the coastal highway, of course. In that case, the caravan would have a chance of skirting the sea of abominations unmolested. A slim chance, at that.

They would also be risking a meeting with something even worse.

'...Damnation.'

Chapter-969: Gifts of the Shore

Sunny's shadow swiftly glided through the darkness, climbing the steep slopes above the vast river of Nightmare Creatures. Sunny was trying to gauge the true size of the horde, but no matter how hard he looked, there was simply no end to it. All kinds of abominations were gathered in a tremendous mob which spilled over the cliffs, undulating and crawling over the landscape.

The horde was stretched into a long line, moving from east to west… toward the coast. The width of it was somewhat bearable, making the thought of trying to cut through the mass of Nightmare Creatures appear tentatively in his mind. However, the length of the horde was simply too oppressive.

The caravan was very large now, and even if Sunny managed to create a breach in the river of monsters, not all vehicles would be able to pass through before a tide of abominations ripped them apart.

…It was still an option, though. He had to think strategically.

To the east, the horde stretched for as far as his shadow could see. To the west, there was still some space between the front ranks of the mob of Nightmare Creatures and the coastal highway. If the column of vehicles sped up while the abominations maintained their pace, there was a good chance that they would narrowly miss each other.

If not, the caravan would be caught between the horde and the ocean, potentially suffering even more casualties. That was not even considering that something could attack them from the water, as well.

Sunny sighed.

'...Crap.'

The first option all but guaranteed that people would die, but had a lower damage ceiling. The second promised a small chance that no one would be killed at all… but had the potential to turn really disastrous if things went wrong.

He hesitated for a few moments, then contacted Gere.

"Yes, Captain?"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"There's a horde of Nightmare Creatures ahead. Full forward, and we will be taking a detour via the highway. Inform everyone to prepare for a tough battle."

There. The decision had been made. Sunny was not happy with it, but at least the caravan stood a chance of escaping unscathed. He was not ready to callously send people to die yet, even if it meant risking a more dire result.

At the end of it, Sunny would know that he at least tried.

Following his orders, Luster sent the Rhino flying forward. Their MWP escorts strained to keep up, but eventually adjusted to the increased pace. The military vehicles comprising the caravan followed suit, and soon, the whole column was moving forward at a reckless speed.

'Do not break.'

Sunny stared back, hoping that nothing would go wrong. If a vehicle broke down in the middle of the charge, there would be no saving its passengers… a faulty transport could also potentially slow down everyone behind it, which would be a complete disaster.

However, the fewer number of Gates along the coast was one of the reasons he had chosen the second option, so if anything, leaving the mountains for a bit should only lessen the probability of a serious malfunction.

The Rhino maneuvered to a branching road and led the caravan west, descending toward the highway. As they approached it, Sunny

tensely observed the horde and tried to calculate if they were going to make it past the advancing mob of abominations before it reached the coast.

For now, it seemed that there was still a narrow window of opportunity.

…But then, as soon as they reached the highway, that window was gone.

For some reason, the front ranks of the horde suddenly went into a frenzy and rushed forward, with the rest of the mob soon following in an avalanche of flesh. Sunny was sure that the Nightmare Creatures could not have sensed the caravan yet, so he did not know why their behavior changed so abruptly. It was as though something on the coast was pulling the abominations toward it.

In any case, with the horde moving much faster now, any chance of passing by without a battle the column might have had were gone. They would have to fight their way through, in the end.

'Curses!'

At least the caravan was only going to be assaulted from one side. Their left flank would be protected by the ocean, precarious as it might sound.

'What the hell spooked these bastards?!'

Looking forward to see the first abominations spilling onto the highway some distance away, Sunny froze for a moment.

'...Oh.'

Out there ahead of them, laying on the shore like a mountain of white flesh, the corpse of a colossal abomination towered above the highway. It looked like a monstrous jellyfish of mind-boggling proportions, some of its lifeless tentacles stretching for hundreds of meters into the dark water.

The strange, transparent flesh of the dead dweller of the depths was torn and scorched, with large chunks of it missing. Strange organs

could be seen beneath it, and a lake of freezing slime covered a long stretch of the highway around it. Something had thoroughly savaged the terrifying creature, and then left without devouring its prey.

…And now, the horde of Nightmare Creatures was rushing to finish the job.

As Sunny watched, the tide of abominations flowed over the highway. The first ranks sunk their fangs into the dead horror with rabid hunger, followed by a hundred other creatures the next second.

The appalling corpse was giant, but not giant enough to satiate them all. Soon, the slower Nightmare Creatures reached the coast, ruthlessly tearing at the bodies of their feasting brethren to reach the succulent white flesh. They crawled over the towering jellyfish like ants, slowly eviscerating its upper layers.

And behind them, countless more were already flowing down the mountain slopes.

Sunny gripped his bow, knowing the caravan would have to fight their way through that dreadful barrier of monstrous bodies soon.

…Actually, a few stragglers were already close enough for Samara to start firing her rifle.

Looking at the approaching scene of morbid carnage, Sunny felt a chill run down his spine.

'It's… it's alright. We can still pull through this…'

That was what he thought…

At least until eerie flashes of crimson light ignited in the haze of the blizzard to his left, far in the ocean.

An enormous, gargantuan shape was moving through the waves, getting closer to the shore.

Chapter-970: Hellfire

As the caravan approached the spilling horde of Nightmare Creatures, Sunny readied himself for battle and feverishly tried to come up with a way — any way — to save the lives of as many people as he could.

However, no matter how much he thought about it, there was just no solution. Many souls were going to be lost today, and the best he could accomplish was to make sure that those who were dying were the soldiers, and not the refugees.

He knew that the caravan would be able to break through the horde of abominations eventually, but he also knew that at least several vehicles, as well as scores of his soldiers, would perish in the process. Hundreds, if not thousands of humans were going to die today.

His gamble did not pay off.

Sunny felt a bit resentful about that.

With a sigh, he summoned the helmet of the Mantle of the Underworld and raised Morgan's Warbow…

It was at that moment that eerie crimson lights flashed through the haze of the blizzard, followed by a scattering of small sparks. He froze and looked to his left, at the dark expanse of the ocean that was obscured by the veil of snow.

Out there, something inconceivably gargantuan was hiding, its enormous shape only revealed by the hazy flashes of crimson light.

'What…'

In the next moment, a deafening roar assaulted his ears, and then, something that he had never expected happened.

Ahead of the convoy, the mass of Nightmare Creatures were suddenly torn apart by a series of earth-shattering explosions. Bits of concrete, flesh, and bone flew into the air, creating a cloud of red fog. A moment later, flowers of angry red flame bloomed on the slope of the mountain, obliterating even more abominations.

The whole world trembled.

Sunny's eyes widened as he swiftly looked back at the ocean. The wall of the blizzard had been unmade, as well. And although the breach in the snowstorm was already closing, he still managed to catch a glimpse of the source of all that carnage.

The gargantuan shape drifting on the waves… was a massive, battered battleship.

He thought he even recognized the lines of its mangled alloy hull.

The vessel was strangely slanted, one of its sides resting much lower than the other one, the deck railings almost touching the water. Its hull was marred by terrible scars and breached in many places, with some of the holes being large enough for the Rhino to drive through — and was just what remained above the surface. The bow of the ship seemed shattered and deformed.

It was a mystery how the vessel remained afloat.

…And yet, it was still capable of firing its armaments. The crimson lights Sunny had seen were the batteries of starboard cannons unleashing hell, and the scattering of sparks was the salvo of missiles being launched from their nests.

As Sunny watched, the ghostly battleship fired another barrage of heavy explosive rounds at the horde of Nightmare Creatures, this time aiming entirely at the slopes of the mountains.

He blinked.

'...I'll be damned.'

Did they really receive… reinforcements?

Sunny did not know where the wrecked vessel had come from, but he was not going to waste this opportunity.

The intention of the unknown captain was clear — the first salvo somewhat cleared the highway, and the second one overshot it by a good degree, slamming into the mountain slope and obliterating a large swath of advancing Nightmare Creatures.

Cutting off those who still remained on the road from the rest of the horde, for now, while simultaneously opening a path for the caravan.

That was his chance!

Silently thanking the daredevil who had used the sinking ship to come to their rescue, Sunny drew his bow and sent the Strike of Thunder flying forward. A moment later, it hit the mountain of white flesh, electrocuting scores of abominations that had been fighting to devour the giant jellyfish just a few moments before.

"All forward units, attack!"

The MWPs running beside the Rhino simultaneously raised their bulky hands and opened fire. Their accuracy while on the move was not too great, but that was not important when massive Gatling guns were involved. Streams of heavy rounds whipped across the surviving Nightmare Creatures, ripping many to shreds.

A moment later, two swarms of missiles shot from the shoulders of the lumbering machines, adding to the chaos.

From somewhere further behind, heavy-duty mass drivers joined the fray, with the turrets of the assault vehicles soon following. The front of the caravan had once again formed into a wedge to open lines of fire for more attackers.

Only this time, there were many more vehicles, Awakened, and war platforms shooting.

The already thinned front rows of the mass of Nightmare Creatures covering the highway were all but erased from existence by their onslaught. A moment later, the Rhino plowed into the remaining stragglers, painting itself with red.

Sunny sent several arrows flying, and then dismissed his bow, summoning the Cruel Sight instead. As soon as he saw the APC clear the stretch of the road obstructed by the horde, he stepped through the shadows and appeared in the thick of the enemies descending from the mountains.

Even though most of them were being destroyed by the continuous barrage from the mangled battleship, many were still getting through. The cacophony of bestial howls, thunderous explosions, and roaring artillery strikes was shaking the world, but he did not let it distract him.

Now that the head of the caravan had broken through the blockade, the battle was not over. On the contrary, it was just starting — they had to hold back the tide of monsters to let the whole column drive through the created corridor, and then stall the abominations to let it escape.

Moving with practiced grace, he butchered a lunging monstrosity that resembled a wingless bat, and then crushed another creature's skull with the butt of his spear. The Dying Wish weaved itself into existence, summoning the ire of the frenzied horde upon him.

But also inspiring his soldiers.

One after another, the cohorts of the Awakened joined Sunny in building a wall of sharp steel along the edge of the highway. The MWPs stood behind them, drowning the mountain slopes with hellfire unleashed by their flamethrowers. Several personnel carriers stopped, releasing companies of mechanized infantry, each soldier clad in an exoskeleton suit of powered armor and carrying a heavy rifle.

In a matter of minutes, the safe corridor was secured. Now, all they had to do was hold the line and show the abominations what the First Army was really made of.

"Devil is with us!"

"Show them hell!"

"Burn in fire, you wretches!"

Sunny was rather surprised by the enthusiasm the soldiers who had just recently joined his caravan were showing. Well… he was not going to complain…

Maybe it was the effect of the Dying Wish, or maybe they just wanted to avenge Erebus Field and wash off the shame of defeat off their souls.

Thrusting the Cruel Sight into the open maw of a Fallen abomination, he suddenly felt a strange jolt run through the Mantle of the Underworld. Suddenly, the onyx armor felt slightly… lighter?

'...What is that about?'

Shaking off the weird feeling, he jerked the corpse of the Nightmare Creature off his spear's blade and looked around, searching for another target.

Chapter-971: Strategic Retreat

Sunny and his soldiers held back the abominations while the long column of vehicles drove through the cleared corridor. The pressure the horde was exerting on them was dire, but not impossible to overcome thanks to the artillery support from the mangled battleship.

The Awakened and the mundane soldiers worked together, aided by the lumbering MWPs and assault vehicles. Soon, the whole mountain slope was torn apart and enveloped in flames. An angry red glow spread through the blizzard, making it seem as though the snow itself was aflame, and the sounds of firing armaments, detonating explosives, and bestial howls fused into an ugly, deafening litany.

Sunny was busy dealing with the most threatening abominations, moving through the shadows to reach them in time. His swift figure appeared from and disappeared into the darkness, leaving a trail of death and devastation behind. Sometimes, it almost seemed as though he was existing in several places simultaneously, which fueled the zeal of his soldiers.

For now, the line of defenders was holding. And every minute they did, more vehicles drove past the monstrous corpse of the giant jellyfish to clear the battlefield.

'So far so good…'

At some point, the cannons of the battleship grew quiet, and the rain of artillery shells stopped. Either the vessel had run out of ammunition, or the stress of sustaining the heavy barrage had turned out to be too much for its already failing hull, causing it to sustain even more damage.

In any case, by that point, most of the caravan had managed to pass the advancing horde. With artillery bombardment gone and no killing field between them and the highway anymore, a flood of Nightmare

Creatures rushed forward, aiming to slam into the defensive line of humans and rip them apart.

That was when Sunny finally utilized Shadow Manifestation. He had not used it before in order to conserve essence for this exact moment, but now there was no point in holding back anything anymore.

Rows of dark spikes rose from the ground, obstructing the advance of the abominations and forcing some to impale themselves on their sharp tips. Pushed from behind by the frenzied mob, more were run through, perishing right there and then. Others were simply slowed down.

The spikes were soon destroyed, but their job was already done — the momentum of the horde was stalled, and the MWPs were able to create a wall of fire in its way.

A few moments later, burning monsters burst through the flames, lunging at the defensive line with rabid rage. They were met by sharp steel and a rain of bullets.

"Hold! We are not done yet!"

Following his command, the soldiers held. The Awakened were burning through their essence, while the mundane fighters were exhausting their ammunition, but they held. One minute, then two…

Finally, the last of the vehicles drove past and disappeared into the haze of the snowstorm.

Sunny let out a relieved sigh. The battle was not over yet, but at least the refugees were safe.

"Infantry, retreat!"

Pulling out of the furious engagement was not an easy task, and had to be done in stages. First, the mundane soldiers orderly retreated, loading into the personnel carriers. After the massive vehicles drove off, the weakened defensive line shifted, slowly moving back.

As they did, the MWPs fired clusters of remote-controlled landmines, leaving hundreds of them in the wake of the retreating human force.

Once enough of the pushing Nightmare Creatures entered the blast zone, the mines detonated, momentarily shaking the world.

The defenders used that moment to abandon the battle. The Awakened jumped onto the roofs of waiting vehicles, which then sped away. The MWPs followed, turning their torsos one hundred and eighty degrees to continue firing back as they ran.

Sunny was left alone to face the wrath of the bloodied horde.

Well… not quite. Nightmare emerged from the shadows with fury and bloodlust burning in his crimson eyes.

Looking at the approaching tide of abominations, Sunny smiled coldly.

"Come at us, bastards…"

The shadows surged around him, shooting forward like dark chains. At the same time, the Cruel Sight shined with incandescent light.

He used the chains and walls of shadows to funnel the Nightmare Creatures, killing and maiming as many as he could with his spear. Nightmare rampaged in their midst, too swift to be caught and brought down… at least for now.

But then again, they were not going to linger for long. All Sunny had to do was buy his soldiers time to put some distance between themselves and the enemy.

Soon, all his defenses were obliterated, and it seemed like he and his Shadow were going to be overwhelmed in mere moments…

That was when both of them turned into incorporeal shadows and fled, leaving a sea of furious Nightmare Creatures behind.

Now, the battle was truly finished.

What was especially great about its conclusion — and a pleasant surprise to Sunny — was that while some abominations lunged in pursuit of the caravan, most remained, seemingly more interested in the carcass of the monstrous jellyfish and the corpses of their own

slain brethren.

It seemed that the caravan had managed to escape.

'Thank the gods...'

***

A minute later, Sunny and Nightmare emerged from the shadows and flew over the highway, soon catching up to the retreating soldiers. The caravan was still out of sight, hidden behind the wall of snow, but they would rejoin the main column soon — in cases like these, the forward force was meant to slow down, so as not to leave itself without sufficient protection for too long.

Sunny ordered his steed to get close to the rearmost vehicle and looked at Samara, who was unsurprisingly sitting on its roof. With her red hair dancing in the wind, she was aiming her rifle back, firing a shot into the blizzard from time to time.

"How are you on essence?"

Samara glanced at him briefly, then smiled.

"Doing well, Captain."

With a nod, he jumped up, placing his feet on the saddle, then leaped over to the roof of the vehicle and settled next to his sharpshooter. Sunny was confident in his riding skill, but not confident enough to try sitting on Nightmare backwards and shooting his bow.

As Morgan's Warbow started weaving itself from scarlet sparks, Sunny lingered for a moment, and then summoned the runes.

'That strange jolt I felt at the start of the battle. Don't tell me… did I finally fulfill the requirements of the Mantle of the Underworld?'

Chapter-972: Soulbound

Sunny zoned out for a little, not paying attention to Samara and the MWPs discharging their weapons from time to time to pick off the most stubborn of the pursuers. The rate of their fire was slowing down, anyway, meaning that the bulk of abominations had either fallen behind or were already killed.

The [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment and its dreadful counter of vanquished foes… gods, he had been stuck with that thing for so long. Despite the fact that Sunny had inherited the onyx armor with some of it already filled, it still took him years to accumulate six thousand victories.

Come to think of it, the whole Mongrel debacle had happened because of his desire to increase the number on the counter somewhat.

'I can't believe I've finally done it.'

Curious to see what changed, Sunny looked at the runes. He was a bit tense… after all, the description of the [Prince of the Underworld] only said that the armor would be growing stronger the more foes he vanquished, and it had — over the years, the cost of keeping its active enchantments running had diminished slightly, and their effects had become a little more pronounced.

The description said nothing about the Mantle receiving an upgrade after the counter was filled. That was just his assumption.

'Come on…'

Concentrating on the name of the Memory, he read:

Memory: [Mantle of the Underworld].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: VII.

'...Oh.'

The Mantle seemed to have grown from a Tier Six Memory to a Tier Seven one. That was… not bad, but it did leave Sunny a little disappointed. He had hoped that it would increase in Rank, instead.

He sighed, then continued to study the runes, turning his attention to the enchantments.

The [Living Stone], [Feather of Truth], [Stalwart], and [Underworld Armament] enchantments remained exactly the same. None of them received any enhancements. The [Prince of the Underworld] had not changed, either, except for the fact that the counter now showed a pleasant [6000/6000] as the number of vanquished foes.

...There was a new enchantment at the end of the list, though.

[Soulbound Relic].

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Huh?'

Suddenly excited, he concentrated on the enchantment to read its description. The description, however, left him largely confused. It did not provide any information about what a soulbound relic was, or what powers that title entailed.

Instead, the shimmering runes simply stated:

[Bind the relic?]

He was probably supposed to answer "yes" or "no".

However, Sunny lingered.

He had no idea what binding the Mantle of the Underworld to his soul meant, and how it would change the onyx armor… or his soul,

for that matter. Of course, the effect was most likely meant to be beneficial, since it was a reward for achieving an amazing feat.

The Spell often had a very strange notion of what "beneficial" meant, though, which did not always coincide with what a human would consider such. Take his own Aspect, for example… its innate Ability, [Shadow Bond], had become the bane of his existence, and yet the Spell clearly thought of it as a precious boon.

Further still, the Mantle of the Underworld was not even the Spell's creation. Rather, it was a Memory of an artifact created by Nether, the Demon of Destiny, most likely for one of his stone children. Sunny suspected that it had once belonged to the Stranger, one of the seven heroes of the Forgotten Shore, who had been of Saint's tribe and possibly her previous lord.

So… what would actually happen if he bound that artifact to his soul?

'Huh…'

He hesitated for a while, then dismissed the runes. Not because he had decided against activating the new enchantment, but rather because his shadows had noticed something strange on the road ahead — the tail of the caravan.

The caravan, for whatever reason, had stopped.

'Damn it.'

That was outside the scope of the action plan he had established. Luster was not supposed to stop the Rhino unless something truly drastic happened.

Sunny prepared himself for the worst, but then relaxed a little after discovering the reason for the unexpected turn of events.

It was honestly hard to miss.

Slightly ahead of the convoy, beached on the cold shore, the mangled battleship that had helped them break through the horde of Nightmare Creatures towered like a vast mountain of metal. Up close,

the damage done to it looked even more dreadful. Its hull was full of holes, and most of its cargo holds seemed to be full of water.

It was obvious that the proud vessel would never sail again.

People were emerging from the breaches in the hull, looking like tiny ants as they loaded into lifeboats and headed for the shore. Some of them had already reached land, and were now talking to a small crowd of soldiers from the caravan.

Sunny let out a relieved sigh, told Samara to establish a perimeter around the rear of the column, and jumped off the vehicle, turning into a shadow.

Gliding to the front of the caravan did not take him long. Returning to his human form near the Rhino, Sunny dismissed the helmet of the Mantle and headed toward the welcoming party.

'I should really thank whoever is… was in charge of that battleship. They saved our skin back there.'

As he neared the small crowd, he heard a pleasant, but strained voice asking a question.

"... your commanding officer, then?"

One of the soldiers responded:

"Oh, that would be the Devil. Uh… I mean Captain…"

The representative of the ship interrupted him, sounding surprised and a little tense.

"Your commanding officer… is a devil?"

The soldier grunted.

"Not a devil. The devil. But don't worry, sir, it's just a nickname… I think…"

At that moment, Sunny finally reached them and saw the speaker. His eyes widened a little.

Tall, handsome, with black hair… and eyes of an unusual, beautiful indigo color. No wonder the voice sounded familiar...

"...Naeve?"

The Nightwalker seemed a bit ragged and worse for wear, but it was unmistakably Master Naeve of the House of Night, his temporary pal. Hearing Sunny's voice, Naeve looked away from the soldier he had been talking with, then lowered his gaze a little and smiled in surprise.

"Sunless? Wait, is it really you? How are you here?"

Sunny coughed awkwardly, then glanced at the talkative soldier with murder in his eyes.

"Ah. That's me, actually. I'm the Devil… in charge of delivering these fools from hell…"

Chapter-973: Mutual Rescue

Naeve stared at him in bewilderment for a few moments, then glanced at the column of military vehicles that stretched far into the distance.

"You are the commanding officer? Things must have changed, then… not that I'm complaining! It's actually great to see a familiar face. I just thought that you were supposed to be in charge of a single cohort of elite Awakened."

Sunny sighed.

"Yeah, well… the situation is a mess, so I ended up being in charge of an entire battalion instead. As well as around twelve thousand refugees. Anyway, thanks for the rescue... I really owe you one, Naeve. That battle could have turned ugly without your ship's support."

He studied the gargantuan shape of the beached vessel, finally recognizing it as the battleship that had delivered his cohort to Antarctica several months ago. Or what was left of it, rather.

Naeve let out an amused chuckle.

"Ah, yes, the rescue… truth be told, it is us who need to be rescued. As you can see, the ship is not exactly in great shape, and the crew — the ones who are still alive — are not in any way prepared for a long landbound march across Antarctica. We are only truly capable at sea, and even then…"

He glanced at the mangled remains of the fearsome vessel.

"...ah, the sea turned out to be more capable than us, in the end. In any case, your caravan is pretty much our best hope. So… do you maybe have space in these vehicles for a few thousand shipwrecked

sailors? Give or take."

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then smiled.

"Sure, no problem. That can be arranged. There's a lot of useful stuff left in those cargo holds, I assume? Come with me, and we can discuss the details. How the hell did your ship end up here, anyway? Wasn't the convoy supposed to be coursing between Falcon Scott and the Northern Quadrant?"

As it turned out, Naeve's vessel was one of those that, like Ariadne, had been reassigned to patrol and relocation duty after the situation in the Antarctic Center worsened with the appearance of hostile titans.

His last orders were to scout and secure the stretch of the coastal highway between Erebus Field and the northern parts of the landmass, probably for the upcoming exodus of the First Army to Falcon Scott.

Sadly, Erebus Field had been destroyed, and the battleship met an adversary that was a little bit too tough for it. In the end, they had managed to kill the monstrous jellyfish, whose corpse eventually washed up on the shore, but not before sustaining catastrophic damage. With no friendly port nearby, the vessel drifted along the coast for a while before encountering Sunny's caravan.

Sunny spared Naeve a grim look.

"...I was actually supposed to be evacuated from the southernmost tip of the region by a vessel called Ariadne. It was destroyed, too, leaving me stranded there. What was Army Command thinking, separating individual battleships from the convoy? Wasn't it obvious that it would be too dangerous for them to sail alone?"

The tall Nightwalker sighed somberly.

"Not as obvious as you might think. The coastal waters are not usually that dangerous, when compared to the true deep sea. Or at least they used to be safer. There were risks involved, of course, but that is a given when you are desperate. Still… we might have

underestimated how much influence the Chain of Nightmares would exert on the ocean."

'Makes sense, I guess.'

Sunny was not surprised that Army Command had chosen to send the divisions spread across the Antarctic Center some naval support. Logistically, it was a risky, but somewhat necessary decision, considering that the Winter Beast had shut down the entire communication network across the landmass.

And it was not like Naeve's battleship had been immediately sunk. The fearsome vessel operated along the coast for close to two months before stumbling on the abominable jellyfish and suffering a Pyrrhic victory that led to its demise.

If anything, Sunny was more surprised that the House of Night had agreed to play ball. Since when were the great clans so altruistic?

'That's a conversation for later…'

For now, both Naeve and Sunny had a lot to do. The structure of the caravan had to be reorganized to make room for the surviving sailors, the sailors themselves had to disembark and reach land, the maimed battleship had to be scoured for anything that could be useful for the long journey to Falcon Scott.

All of that required time, which meant that the column would remain static for a while. A proper defensive perimeter had to be established, guard duty shifts had to be set, refugees needed to be fed and cared for. Sunny might have as well given an order to make camp, but he was extremely reluctant to remain on the coast for an entire night.

So, all these things had to happen fast.

Luckily, he was not the only Master defending the caravan anymore. Even though most of Naeve's powers seemed to have to do with water, he was still an Ascended… more than that, he was an Ascended from a great clan. The Nightwalker was an absolute elite among fighters, with long years of battle experience under his belt and a vast arsenal of powerful Memories stored in his soul.

Having someone like that by his side made Sunny feel much more confident in their chances of reaching Falcon Scott in one piece.

'But, coming back to a vast arsenal of Memories…'

Sunny looked at Naeve with a strange expression on his face. The handsome man noticed it and raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"Uh… yes? Did you want something, Sunless?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then smiled.

"As a matter of fact, I do. Say, Naeve… you Nightwalkers are all about naval combat, right? You wouldn't happen to have a Memory or two that can help a land rat like me do well in water, would you? You know… things like breathing under it, swimming like a torpedo, and so on. Because, if you do… I am willing to trade. No, actually, I am really, really willing to trade.

I all but swore to never get close to water without a Memory like that, you see."

Naeve blinked a couple of times.

"Well… actually, I do have something like that, yes. What do you want to trade for?"

Sunny hesitated, then pointed at a young man who just happened to walk by them at that moment.

"See that guy? His name is Luster. He's a very valuable Awakened. A top notch talent! Do you want me to trade him to you?"

The Nightwalker coughed.

"Uh… I am pretty sure that Army Command would not be happy if you sold me one of your subordinates, Sunless."

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then sighed.

"That's true. A pity…"

Chapter-974: Shadow in the Shell

In the end, Sunny did make a trade with Naeve. He had a surplus of Memories after slaying many Nightmare Creatures to defend the convoy, and the Nightwalker was in dire need of weapons and armor suited for land combat, to arm his own Awakened.

There had been a full cohort of them aboard the battleship once, but now, only four remained. Since these warriors of the House of Night would be defending the caravan along with the other Awakened in the near future, and Saint was still slumbering, Sunny did not drive a hard bargain.

That was how he received two new Memories, which were meant to cover the gap in his arsenal when it came to traversing and fighting in the water.

One of them was a simple Awakened charm that allowed him to breathe underwater. It was called [Essence Pearl], and had two enchantments. One passively produced air, the other had to be activated and gifted the wielder with the ability to see clearly, as if they were wearing a glass mask.

The description of the charm simply stated that breathing was the essence of life, and beauty was its purpose. One had to be able to see clearly to appreciate beauty, and live long enough to enjoy it.

'How romantic.'

The second Memory was Ascended, and appeared to be an… armor, of sorts. In truth, it was more of a harness made out of a fisherman's net, which provided no protection whatsoever, but allowed the wearer to swim with surprising speed.

The harness was called [Nimble Catch], and its description told the story of a muskrat king who had sworn to eat a wondrous fish, only to learn that it could only be caught by using the eyes of the monarch of birds — his brother — as bait. The whole thing was very weird.

'...What's a muskrat, though? Do rats eat fish?'

The only drawback of the strange harness was that, as usual, no other armor-type Memory could be used while wearing it. Nevertheless, Sunny was happy with his acquisitions. The inability to defend himself in water had been eating at him ever since the sea journey to Antarctica, and even though he hoped to never have to use these new Memories, simply possessing them was calming.

Several hours after encountering the beached battleship, the caravan drove forward once again. The length of it remained the same, but there were many more people in the vehicles now.

Naeve had not been joking when he said that there were thousands of sailors on the mangled vessel. And even then, those were only those who had survived. Sunny honestly did not know whether to consider them soldiers or refugees, but he knew that Sergeant Gere and the other officers would sort that out for him soon.

The caravan had a lot of spare weapons, especially now that they had unloaded the surviving cargo holds of the battleship, so there was a good chance that many of the sailors would become active combatants. Even if not, Sunny was already satisfied to have another Master around.

Naeve's presence also did wonders for the morale of everyone in the caravan, not only because he was an Ascended, but also because of how flamboyantly he had appeared. If there was a sure way to win someone's adoration, it was to shower a horde of Nightmare Creatures trying to eat them with a barrage of artillery fire at just the right moment.

'Huh… maybe I should remember that method…'

Sunny remained on guard until the column of vehicles turned and left the coastal highway behind, climbing back into the mountains. It was

only then that he allowed himself to relax and descended from the roof of the Rhino to its interior.

After exchanging a few words with Professor Obel and Beth, he climbed into one of the sleeping niches and closed it to receive some privacy.

There, he lingered for a few moments, and then summoned the runes.

After thinking about it for a while, Sunny finally decided to take the risk and bind the Mantle of the Underworld to his soul. He did not know what would happen, and the idea of being left without a proper suit of armor was more than slightly disturbing, but…

To tell the truth, Sunny was extremely curious to see what would happen.

Soon, he was staring at a string of shimmering runes.

[Bind the relic?]

He hesitated for a few moments, sighed, and then whispered quietly:

"Yes."

Sunny had dismissed the Mantle, just in case, and was now wearing the soft fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud. For that reason, he did not see any changes immediately.

For a few seconds, nothing happened.

And then, the voice of the Spell spoke.

It said:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

Sunny eyes widened.

'What?!'

He flinched, almost hitting his head on the roof of the niche. His heart skipped a bit.

'What the hell?! What do you mean?!'

But then, the voice of the Spell resounded again.

[You have received an Attribute.]

At the same time, Sunny felt a… a profound, but unexplainable change. The change seemed to affect both his body and his soul. It was not painful, and did not feel harmful… just very, very strange.

It was as if his skin turned to stone, but also remained exactly the same.

At the same time, he felt as if the enchantments of the Mantle of the Underworld were at his fingertips, even though the onyx armor was not summoned, and in fact had been destroyed.

'...Huh?'

Sunny remained motionless for a while, trying to understand what had happened to him. Then, unable to find answers, he turned his attention to the shimmering runes.

In the list of his Memories, there was no Mantle of the Underworld anymore.

However…

He now possessed a new Attribute.

Holding his breath, Sunny read:

Attributes: [Fated], [Flame of Divinity], [Master of Shadows], [Blood Weave], [Bone Weave]...

And there, a new string of runes appeared at the end.

Attribute: [Marble Shell].

Chapter-975: Marble Shell

Marble Shell…

Sunny stared at the runes with a thoughtful expression on his face, then concentrated on them. Immediately, new strings appeared in the air, forming a description.

Attribute: [Marble Shell].

Attribute Description: [In the deep darkness of the underworld, a prideful demon forged seven suits of splendid armor for his favorite creations. The intricate shells were both a boon and a test, since only those worthy of his regard could unlock the mantle's true potential and bear its weight.]

There were more runes, but Sunny stopped to think for a bit.

'Favorite creations…'

He knew that Saint and her kind were an artificial race created by Nether, the ruler of the Underworld and the Demon of Choice… or Destiny, depending on how one decided to translate the runes. He also knew that Saint's armor bore a strong resemblance to the Mantle of the Underworld, although it was not quite as impressive.

The original Stone Saint had been one of the smallest and weakest living statues that used to dwell in the Dark City. By the time Sunny reached the place of their battle against the Fallen attackers, the bigger and more powerful warriors of her kind had already been destroyed, leaving only her, an Awakened Monster, to finish the fight.

What he got from all that was that Saint had only been a foot soldier in Nether's army… most likely. The armor she wore was a true masterpiece of craftsmanship, but not something on the level of the

seven Mantles, which had been gifted to the high-ranking officers of the stone legion by the Prince of the Underworld.

'Gods. If Saint is just a foot soldier, then just how terrifying was Nether's army?'

Well... they had to have been pretty terrifying, in order to challenge the gods. The Stone Saint he had killed on the desolate plaza of the Dark City was a pale remnant of her original self, as well, since the living statues had not been consumed by Corruption yet during the war between the daemons and the gods.

Shaking his head, Sunny turned his attention back to the runes. The description of the Marble Shell was a bit unusual, since it included much more information than that of other Attributes.

He continued to read:

Attribute Traits: [Living Stone], [Feather of Truth], [Stalwart], [Underworld Armament], [Mantle], [Shell], [Bound].

The first four were just like the enchantments of the old Mantle, with the exception of [Stalwart]. The extremely high protection against physical attacks and the high protection against elemental attacks remained the same, but the moderate protection against mind and soul attacks had been elevated to high protection, as well.

'Very good…'

The defensive trait of the Shell was passive, but the other three traits required essence to function. From now on, Sunny would have to circulate it through his own body in certain ways instead of pouring it into the Memory to activate the effect.

That was… a bit weird. Luckily, he seemed to possess an instinctive understanding of how the essence had to be circulated exactly, and his control over it was intricate enough to achieve the desired result.

The other three traits, however, were extremely interesting.

The [Mantle] and [Shell] were connected, and in fact mutually exclusive. That was because those were not really traits, but actually

forms that his new Attribute could assume.

The Shell was a dormant form, while the Mantle was an active form.

As the Shell, the armor existed under his skin… or rather, was his skin? Basically, it provided all the benefits of the Mantle of the Underworld, including access to its enchantments, albeit in a muted and somewhat weakened form.

Sunny dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud and stared at his arm incredulously.

His skin looked… pretty much the same, but somehow even paler and smoother.

'Great. As if I wasn't being called a creepy porcelain doll often enough, already.'

He sighed, then jabbed his arm with a finger. There was something strange… his skin remained soft and elastic, but when sufficient pressure was applied, it suddenly became hard as stone. Basically, it was becoming rigid when struck. After a few experiments, which must have looked really weird from the side, he determined that he could control the process consciously, too.

'That's neat. So I will always have passive resistance to all kinds of damage. I'll be able to repair damage to my skin with the [Living Stone], as well, although that won't help me against internal injuries.'

He activated [Feather of Truth] and felt his fist becoming much, much heavier. Then, he made his entire body extremely light.

'Ah! This feels so weird!'

Sunny did not exactly start to float, but he could potentially jump extremely high or hit extremely hard with the help of this new ability. The applications were nearly endless!

A silly smile appeared on his face.

'And I can always enhance the effect of a single charm, as well!'

Better yet, by augmenting his body with the shadows, he would be augmenting his Shell, too, considering that it was a part of him. That, in fact…

That was the real benefit of binding the armor.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'Wait a second…'

Had he not dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud to take a look at his skin? Which meant… which meant that he could benefit from the defensive qualities of the Shell and summon an armor-type Memory on top of that, using both to protect himself at the same time!

'Damn!'

That was simply incredible.

Sunny was consumed by excitement for several minutes, then remembered that he currently had no powerful armor-type Memories to speak of. Well, it did not matter too much… he would find one eventually.

Plus, there was the [Mantle] trait of the Marble Shell, as well.

Its function was pretty simple — it activated the Attribute, making it assume the form of a full suit of armor. Unlike Memories, Sunny did not have to spend essence to summon the Mantle, since it was simply a transformation of the Shell. Similarly, the Mantle was considered to be a part of his body, and so augmenting one with the shadows would strengthen the other in turn.

In its active form, the Attribute awakened its full power — the effects of [Stalwart], [Living Stone], [Underworld Armament], and the [Feather of Truth] were not weakened anymore, reaching their full potential.

Sadly, wearing another armor-type Memory on top of the Mantle was out of the question.

'Still great!'

So, Sunny had not really lost his armor. On the contrary, it had become stronger, and could be summoned in its full glory at any moment. It's just that the Mantle was now an innate part of him, as opposed to a Memory.

And finally, there was the [Bound] trait.

Its function was very simple… it bound the Marble Shell to Sunny's soul, which meant that one would grow alongside the other. Currently, the Attribute was of the Ascended Rank, just like Sunny.

If Sunny became a Saint, the Marble Shell would become Transcendent, too.

…Laying in the sleeping niche and feeling the Rhino vibrate around him, Sunny closed his eyes and let out a satisfied sigh.

'Six thousand kills… ah, it was worth it…'

Chapter-976: Ubiquitous Law

Sunny had planned to catch a couple of hours of sleep, but in the end, he was too mesmerized by the promise of the Marble Shell to close his eyes even for a second. That new Attribute of his was both supremely powerful and complex, which meant that unlocking its full potential would demand a lot of insight and ingenuity.

If he did manage to master it, though…

Laying in the darkness of the sleeping niche, Sunny smiled ominously.

'What a great present. It should not have come as a surprise, though.'

The challenge of the [Prince of the Underworld] had been a steep one. Six thousand defeated opponents… most Awakened — those normal people that did not go out of their way to seek out battle after battle — would never face that many adversaries in their entire lifetime, perhaps.

More than that, Sunny suspected that the enchantment had actually had several stages, while he only completed the last one. After all, the counter of vanquished foes had already been filled to some extent by the time Sunny repaired the Mantle of the Underworld.

An Ascended armor of the sixth Tier, demanding six thousand kills to rise to the seventh.

If the onyx armor had started off as a Memory of the first Tier, demanding a thousand kills to rise to the second, two thousand to rise to the third… then it might have taken no less than twenty-one thousand defeated enemies for it to acquire the [Soulbound Relic] enchantment.

'What a scary number…'

No wonder the Marble Shell was such a potent Attribute… not to mention its connection to one of the daemons.

Whether it had been the First Lord of the Bright Castle or one of his companions that wore the Mantle before, Sunny really owed them some gratitude. Even more of it, to be precise.

Regardless of the past, though, there was a lot for him to think about when it came to the future.

Sunny instantly understood that the Marble Shell would drastically — and, most importantly, passively — increase his defensive capability and resilience. Yes, the dormant state of the Attribute was a weakened version of its active form, and yes, the [Living Stone] trait only allowed him to mend his skin, as opposed to his entire body.

Sure, he did not currently possess a powerful Memory armor to synergize with the Shell.

But it did not matter. In a sense, Sunny himself was the armor now.

What truly enthused him about the new Attribute was the possibility of finally breaking one of the most ubiquitous laws of the Nightmare Spell — in the world ruled by it, attack almost always trumped defense. No matter how tough an armor was, a powerful and well-placed strike from a weapon of a similar Rank would most often overcome it.

Otherwise, he would have never been able to kill Awakened Nightmare Creatures as a Sleeper, or continuously challenge enemies that were, strictly speaking, out of his league.

Everything had its limits, of course, but generally, that was how things worked.

Not anymore, though. Not with what his Aspect was capable of. Someone else would have found the Marble Shell a powerful aid in battle, but in Sunny's hands, it could be so much more.

Possibly the most important quality of the strange Attribute was that it had become a part of his body, and as such, could be augmented with the shadows at the same time. An Ascended armor might be

vulnerable to an Ascended blade, but with four shadows enhancing it?

Maybe not.

That went for elemental, mind, and soul attacks as well, albeit to a slightly lesser degree.

Add Blood Weave and Bone Weave to the equation, with the [Living Stone] on top of it all…

Sunny might not be ready to go around slaying titans just yet, but he was halfway convinced that being hit by Goliath would not instantly kill him anymore.

And that was just defense.

The Marble Shell had the potential to do wonders for his attack potency and lethality, too.

The [Feather of Truth] had always been an unassuming, but insidiously powerful enchantment. Now that it could be applied to his entire body, as opposed to only his armor, though… that really changed everything.

Making himself lighter could drastically increase his speed and mobility. Making himself heavier could help Sunny weather powerful blows, as well as increase the impact of his own strikes — force was heavily dependent on mass, after all, and it was hard to achieve one without the other.

The second part of force was acceleration, so…

If Sunny could learn how to skillfully weave two sides of the [Feather of Truth] together, his combat performance would take a significant leap forward. Wearing a light armor on top of the Shell would be the most optimal choice, in that regard, since doing so would grant him a double layer of protection while not encumbering him too much.

Sunny already had some knowledge of how to use the [Feather of Truth] in battle, but he was going to need to adjust to its new scope, as well as relearn a lot of things, both about the trait itself and about

how he approached combat in general.

It would demand a lot of time, practice, insight, and most of all thinking… not to mention perfecting his ability to guide essence in just the right way. However, dismantling and mastering battle styles was something Sunny was exceedingly good at, so he had no doubt that he would see some improvements very soon.

A modest improvement was not his goal, though. He wanted to reach a state where using the [Feather of Truth] to its full potential was an instinct for him, to make it something that he did not even have to think about to do.

That… would be a bit harder to achieve.

Not impossible, though.

Sunny's personal progress in terms of pure combat mastery had been stalled for a while, so now, he was actually excited about a new challenge.

Shifting his perception to one of the shadows to observe the dark landscape flowing past the moving Rhino, he smiled wryly.

'...Luckily, I have a whole continent of Nightmare Creatures to practice on.'

Chapter-977: Through the Blizzard

Eventually, Sunny climbed out of the sleeping niche and went about the business of managing the caravan. They had made it far into the mountains, and were already moving north, toward their true goal.

The blizzard was still raging, reducing visibility to almost zero. The landscape was as grim and foreboding as ever.

Surrounding areas needed to be scouted, maps needed to be updated, reports needed to be received, and a hundred other things demanded his attention.

Before getting down to it, Sunny spared a few moments to stare at the grey fabric and lusterless black leather of the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Who could have thought that he would be reduced to seriously using it again, after all that time?

'It sure is much more comfortable than walking around in a full plate of steel armor. Ah, the old me had it good…'

Actually, not really.

Sunny was ready to climb to the roof of the Rhino when he noticed Beth staring at him with a strange expression. He lingered for a moment.

"What?"

She blinked a couple of times, then pulled her gaze away.

"No, no… nothing…"

Sunny frowned.

"Just say it, will you?"

Beth remained silent for a second, then asked hesitantly:

"Are you… uh… are you wearing makeup?"

This time, it was his turn to stare.

"...What? No! Why would you think that?"

The young woman gave him a dubious look and shook her head.

"You just look a little different, that's all."

Sunny grinned.

"Oh. I naturally have the complexion of a marble statue, no makeup involved. Didn't you know?"

Beth turned away with a sigh and mumbled under her nose:

"Damned Awakened… how is this fair?"

Suppressing a chuckle, Sunny dissipated into the shadows and appeared on top of the Rhino, sighing as the bone-chilling wind smashed into his chest.

Surprisingly, though… he was not that cold. His passive resistance to the elements was already making itself known.

Without wasting any time, Sunny made himself heavier for better stability, summoned the Memory of Ice, and wrapped the shadow he kept with himself around his body, simultaneously circulating essence to double the enhancement granted to the charm.

A couple of seconds later, he felt even more comfortable. Sunny still sensed a slight chill, but it was in no way bothersome. Additionally, the winds were powerless against him. It was as if Sunny had turned into a small cliff.

'Huh.'

Summoning Morgan's Warbow, he sat down on the roof and closed

his eyes.

'I can get used to this…'

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Their journey to Falcon Scott continued. Traversing the abomination-infested expanse of the Antarctic Center was still hard and dangerous, but with Naeve assisting Sunny in defending the caravan, things became a little bit easier.

The two Masters rarely saw each other, communicating mostly over the chain of relays in the military vehicles. Sunny was stationed at the head of the column, while Naeve stayed in the rear to provide the best possible defensive coverage.

Mostly, they only met face-to-face during the rare stops and when an especially dire threat demanded both of them to fight side by side to vanquish it. Going into battle with the Nightwalker was both comfortable and effective.

'Ah. Finally, a professional…'

Naeve was an extremely skilled warrior, using a long bone harpoon and a net woven out of unnaturally durable threads to herd and decimate Nightmare Creatures.

It was obvious that he was not entirely comfortable fighting on land, and his Aspect powers seemed to be under severe restriction, though, so the scion of the House of Night mostly supported Sunny and made it easier for him to kill their enemies.

Which was more than welcome.

Naeve was also more cautious than most Masters tended to be. Not overly so, but enough for Sunny to notice the difference between the two of them. It was understandable… after all, the Nightwalker had a family to come back to. He carried more than one life on his shoulders.

That perspective was a bit new to Sunny, and made him think about things that he had never considered before.

Other than that, things were going… as expected. The caravan continued to grow, several more groups of Erebus Field survivors joining it. By then, Sunny was secretly starting to thank the gods that Naeve's ship had suffered catastrophic damage. Without the additional supplies looted from its holds, he would have to deal with a supply shortage pretty soon.

As it was, though, he had enough to feed everyone and arm those who could and knew how to fight, for now.

Sunny was curious to see if anyone else would notice his subtle change, but in the end, the only other person other than Beth who showed any reaction was Kim. At some point, she gave him a very weird look and hastily turned away without asking anything.

Kim was able to see vulnerabilities in everything she looked at, after all, and Sunny had recently become much less vulnerable. No wonder she was surprised.

'Great. What bizarre stories are they going to come up with now?'

Hopefully, Belle would not be giving him weird looks again…

The Crow also noticed that something about Sunny had changed. The Echo landed on his shoulder, stared at him with curiosity for a few moments, and then suddenly tried to peck him in the neck. After that, the bird let out a startled caw.

"Ston! Ston!"

Then, it flew away and stayed in the air for a while.

Being pecked by an Awakened Monster was not a pleasant experience, but the Shell did not show any sign of giving in to the sharp beak. Overall, Sunny was very satisfied by the strange incident.

…The tumultuous march north continued.

Swarms of Nightmare Creatures were slaughtered.

More soldiers died.

More refugees died, too.

With thousands and thousands of them cooped up in the moving vehicles, it was inevitable that some would succumb to the Spell. Despite all Sunny's efforts to make sure that new Aspirants were found and isolated in time, there had been a couple instances where the security measures failed.

The results were bloody.

Sunny was shaken by the loss of civilian lives, but in the grand scheme of things, they were just drops in the ocean. An entire metropolis had been erased off the map just a few days ago, and that was simply one instance of the inconceivable carnage and destruction reigning over the Southern Quadrant.

Sunny was growing really tired of watching people die.

He also knew that the death toll would not stop growing anytime soon.

Chapter-978: Back Again

The Rhino let out a disturbing, screeching sound and came to a shuddering stop. Sunny remained on the roof for a few moments, looking down with a grim expression on his face, then jumped down. Landing softly in the snow, he took a few steps away and studied his battered APC.

The mighty machine… had seen better days.

Its armored hull was littered with deep gouges and makeshift patches of scavenged alloy. The wedge-shaped ram at the front of the Rhino was deformed and painted dull red, its deployment mechanism irreparably damaged and stuck in the lowered position.

The six mighty wheels were still intact, but all the additional thrusters were either spent or destroyed.

What worried Sunny the most, though, were the sensitive internals of the APC. Despite the fact that Kim and Samara had been desperately trying to keep them from deteriorating completely, most of the systems were slowly dying. The Rhino had been put through too much abuse, and now, it seemed to be on the verge of failing.

A sad, bitter sigh escaped from Sunny's lips.

'Damn it.'

…Behind him, the rest of the caravan was in a similar condition. The column of dilapidated vehicles stretched for many kilometers, each showing some signs of battle damage and stress. Most vehicles had not suffered as much as the Rhino, which served as the vanguard machine, but then again, most of them were also not as shielded and robust as the custom APC of the Irregulars.

After studying the state of the caravan for a minute or two, Sunny

turned around and walked forward. Passing between the massive shape of Abomination and the much smaller, but similarly fearsome shape of Blackie, he stopped and looked at the vast valley below.

As he did, the Crow landed on his shoulder.

Sunny and the three Echoes remained silent for a while.

The valley was covered in snow, but it could not hide the upturned soil and the signs of a devastating battle that must have raged here once. Craters and mounds of frozen earth littered the landscape, hinting at a heavy artillery bombardment. A ghastly mountain of charred bones towered near the slopes, and some distance away from it lay a graveyard of broken war machines.

Thousands upon thousands of Nightmare Creatures were moving through the snow.

Worse than that, thirteen active Gates ringed the valley, tearing reality apart.

"What a terrible place."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then looked at Naeve, who had just reached the crest of the hill. The Nightwalker was looking down with a sour face, his broken arm still resting in a makeshift sling. He had been wounded in a random battle a few days ago, and was yet to fully recover.

Sunny smiled.

"...Yeah. It was even more terrible when seven new Gates opened right when we tried to deal with the six that had already manifested, encircling the whole division. That was how Antarctica welcomed us, all that time ago."

Indeed, Sunny knew that valley well. It was where he had fought his first real battle in the Southern Quadrant, unleashing Saint to defend the mundane soldiers. Looking down, he could recognize the spots where he had slain the Gate Guardians, as well as the spot where the division had burned its dead before moving on.

Was he feeling… nostalgic?

Well, it did not matter, anyway.

What did matter was that the valley was only a day's travel away from Falcon Scott.

They had finally made it… almost.

In the end, it took the caravan two weeks to get here. June was almost over, but the long night of Antarctica still showed no sign of ending. The world was dark, as always, and full of abominable horrors, as always.

Nothing truly noteworthy had happened in these two weeks. It had just been a constant, grueling, arduous struggle to survive. Every kilometer they traversed had been a little bit harder than the previous one. The numerous skirmishes and battles they had fought all started to blend into one, at some point, and the names of soldiers and civilians Sunny had lost did, too.

All in all, few people died… comparatively. Considering the overall size of the caravan, the number of casualties was statistically insignificant.

But people were not statistics.

Sunny grimaced and looked away.

He might have brought most of the caravan this close to Falcon Scott in one piece, but the hardest part was still ahead of them.

Due to its nature as a place of a massive — and static — concentration of humans, the siege capital naturally attracted numerous Nightmare Creatures. It was constantly besieged by hordes of abominations, with more arriving from the south every day.

The caravan had to somehow break through that blockade to reach the city gates.

Fortunately, they did not have to do it alone.

Sunny had already contacted Army Command through the Dream Realm, reporting the date they would arrive in this valley. He was promised assistance and reinforcements, as well as a special envoy to help the refugees make it through safely.

The envoy was running late, though.

His shadows would have noticed anyone on the slopes of the mountains, and he did not see any humans in the valley. If someone really planned to make it to the other side and meet the caravan, Sunny had no idea how they were planning to fight their way through the sea of Nightmare Creatures below.

Glancing at Naeve, he frowned.

"...Where the hell is that envoy?"

Before the Nightwalker could answer, the Crow suddenly let out a nervous screech and hurriedly flew away.

In the next second, a massive shadow suddenly dove down from above, approaching the caravan with stunning speed.

Sunny was already drawing the string of his bow, but paused at the last moment, looking at the landing creature with wide eyes.

Massive… powerful body that resembled that of a lion, mighty white wings, beautiful golden eyes of an eagle…

In front of him, proud and majestic, was a very familiar griffin.

Chapter-979: Full Circle

The mighty griffin landed in front of the caravan, a cloud of snow rising into the air around it. A moment later, a human figure jumped off its back, landing not too far away from Sunny and Naeve.

The man in front of them was tall and had broad, powerful shoulders. His light armor was crafted from the adamantine scales of an unknown monster, with a blue scarf wrapped carelessly around his neck. His hair was the color of straw, as was his thick beard.

The stranger's eyes were bright blue and piercing.

…Master Roan had not changed a lot since the last time he and Sunny met. Sky Tide's husband seemed a little more rugged and weary, but other than the length of his beard, everything else was exactly the same.

'How the hell is he even more handsome now?'

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then smiled a little.

It was good to see Roan alive and well.

In retrospect, his sudden appearance made sense. Since the whole of the White Feather clan had been banished to Antarctica, where else would Roan be?

The man in question, meanwhile, studied the caravan for a few moments, and then headed toward Sunny and Naeve. As he approached, he paused slightly and stared at them with a strange expression. Then, a surprised smile appeared on Roan's face.

"Sunless? Wait… it's you? You're the famous Devil of Antarctica?"

Sunny shifted a little, then cleared his throat in embarrassment.

"Uh… yes? That's what people call me these days, I guess. Anyway, it is very nice to see you again, Master Roan. Really."

Roan remained silent for a few moments, then suddenly laughed.

"Ah… why did nobody tell me? It makes sense, though! You do love striking deals with people… in exchange for soul shards… "

As Sunny coughed, Naeve looked at them with curiosity.

"You know each other?"

Still a little startled, Sunny nodded.

"...Yes. Master Roan of the White Feather clan, meet Master Naeve of the House of Night. The two of us are in charge of this caravan."

The two Ascended briefly studied each other, then exchanged nods. There was no real tension between them, but Sunny noticed that they were not entirely at ease with each other, unlike how they were with him.

It was understandable. White Feather was a vassal clan of Valor, while Naeve came from the great clan Night. Politically, there was somewhat of a wall between them… which was probably only made taller by the fact that Valor and Song were at war, while the House of Night remained neutral.

Would it continue to stay on the sidelines, though? That, nobody could tell.

Master Roan offered a handshake to Naeve, then glanced at the column of battered vehicles again.

"How many people do you have?"

It seemed that the time for pleasantries was over, and they were about to discuss business. Sunny was extremely motivated to get his people out of the open and to safety as soon as possible, so he was all for it.

Looking back, he said:

"Four thousand soldiers, thirty thousand civilian refugees, plus a few thousand shipwrecked sailors. I also have one hundred Awakened and around twenty Sleepers, as well as my own cohort of Irregulars. Oh, and a dozen or so Echoes between all of us, including a couple of Fallen ones."

Abomination and Roan's griffin were currently having a staring contest, so the last point was self-evident.

The handsome Master gave him a long stare.

"...You really brought these people here all the way from Erebus Field?"

Sunny smiled bleakly.

"Most of them, yes. A few hundred were with me from before that, though. These poor souls have crossed more than three thousand kilometers in search of shelter."

Roan lingered for a moment, then briefly grasped his shoulder.

"You did well, Sunless. You did very well."

His words were encouraging, but his tone was somber.

Thirty thousand refugees might have sounded like a large number, considering how hard it was to escort such a caravan across the ravaged expanse of the Antarctic Center… but there had been tens of millions of people in Erebus Field.

Of course, there were more survivors than those gathered by Sunny, who had found their way to Falcon Scott or other siege capitals on their own, but the loss of life must have still been tremendous.

With a sigh, he looked away.

"So, how are we going to do this? I suspect that fighting our way to the city won't be easy."

Master Roan remained silent for a few moments, then smiled.

"Actually, you don't have to worry about it… too much, I mean. We've been receiving many refugee convoys in the last week or so, so the procedure has been polished a lot by now."

He turned around and looked at the valley ringed by thirteen Gates.

"At my signal, there will be a sortie from within the city walls to create a distraction. At the same time, your Irregular colleagues will clear the side road that circles this valley. All we have to do is cut through the remaining abominations and reach the entrance to the road. Are you and your people up for that?"

Sunny looked into the distance and smiled.

'How fitting.'

Wasn't it the exact same road that his cohort had been ordered to secure during the first days of the campaign?

Sunny had left Falcon Scott three months ago, and now, he was returning. The circle was complete.

What a tough road it had been.

Had he ever suspected that things would turn out this way? Millions of people were dead, the First Army was in retreat all across the Antarctic Center, and he had somehow ended up being responsible for tens of thousands of lives. Humanity had been thoroughly beaten by the Chain of Nightmares in this region of the Southern Quadrant.

…Not a chance. He had a suspicion that things would turn out disastrously for the First Army, but not so soon, and not to such an extent. Not to mention how bizarre his own situation was.

'Well, what does it matter?'

Giving Roan a nod, Sunny stretched his shoulders and said:

"...Yes. Yes, we are. Let's get the hell out of here."

Chapter-980: Siege Capital

The preparations did not take long. As the caravan was getting ready for one last push, the three Masters briefly discussed the plan of the battle.

There was not a lot they had to do. If things went well, most of the Nightmare Creatures would be drawn away by the city defenders, and the mountain road would be cleared by the Irregulars. However, it was always a good idea to prepare a few contingencies, just in case.

At some point, Roan gave Sunny a studying look and said:

"...You look different, Sunless."

Sunny tilted his head a little, confused.

"Why wouldn't I? The last time we saw each other, I was still an Awakened. Oh… or do you mean my skin?"

Roan shook his head with a smile.

"No, I don't mean your appearance. You just seem... older."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"I am older, though? By about two years?"

The handsome Master chuckled.

"That you are. Anyway, I think we are as ready as we can be. Should I send the signal?"

Sunny nodded, prompting Roan to summon a Memory that resembled a waxed clay tablet. He simply drew a jagged line on it, then waved at them and walked over to his griffin.

Not long after that, the sortie that was supposed to lead most of the Nightmare Creatures away from the valley commenced. It started with a heavy missile barrage, which was then followed by a full company of MWPs appearing on the far side, accompanied by many cohorts of Awakened.

Sunny and Naeve silently watched as the sea of abominations rushed forward, then glanced at each other and dashed toward their vehicles. Abomination and Blackie rose from the ground and shook their gaunt bodies, preparing for a battle.

They did not have to wait long.

As soon as the horde of Nightmare Creatures shifted to the far side of the valley and spilled out of it, pursuing the retreating diversion force, the Rhino growled and lunged forward. The battered APC was functioning perfectly, as if it had gathered all its remaining strength for one last glorious charge.

The long column of vehicles followed the mighty machine.

The caravan rolled down into the valley. Before any of the remaining Nightmare Creatures could react, an onslaught of bullets, arrows, and magical projectiles fell upon them, tearing the monsters apart.

Further away, the tail of the deceived horde sensed that something was wrong. Scores of abominations turned around and saw the descending column of vehicles. Their howls and shrieks informed the rest of the creatures, and a mass of them staggered, struggling to change targets.

Before the tail of the horde could reorient itself, however, a rain of strange metal rods fell from the sky, piercing the ground in front of them in a loose line. Then, blinding arcs of electricity suddenly shot between the rods, creating a wall of lightning.

The first few Nightmare Creatures that tried to pass through the barrier were instantly turned to ash. Roan was holding them back, for now, but his reserves of essence were probably not going to last long.

Plus, the more powerful abominations could weather the damage and

slip through the lightning wall. Others could simply leap over it… one was already trying, for that matter.

Before it could land, though, a javelin fell from the sky, piercing the creature through.

The Rhino was already heading for the distant entrance to the mountain road.

The caravan's Echoes were moving ahead of the vehicles, tearing apart those abominations that had somehow survived the ranged attacks. Even Crow was helping, diving down to rip into the weaker enemies with its beak and talons.

Sunny was sending one arrow flying after another. Each pierced an especially vulnerable spot on the bodies of the Nightmare Creatures, killing them instantly. His accuracy was scarily perfect… months of fighting in Antarctica had really honed his once rudimentary archery skill.

'Kai would have been proud…'

Shifting his aim a little, Sunny sighed. What was his friend doing right now? Probably staring at the anchored battleships and waiting for his turn to board them.

Chasing away all distractions, Sunny concentrated on the task at hand.

…By the time Roan's lightning barrier failed, the caravan was already climbing the steep slope, well on its way to leave the valley. Naeve had arranged for an improvised minefield to be set up in the way of any potential pursuers, so their retreat had a good chance of happening without a hitch.

And indeed, to everyone's surprise, nothing went wrong.

Higher in the mountains, Sunny was standing on the roof of the Rhino and staring at the familiar Gate up ahead. That was the place where he had slain the Gate Guardian, Defiled Witness, a few months ago. Very little had changed in this place.

The mountain road was suspiciously empty of enemies, and very soon, he realized why. A man in heavy plate armor suddenly appeared from behind a large boulder and effortlessly jumped to the roof of the Rhino, landing just a few steps away from Sunny.

His face was hidden behind the visor of a closed helmet, but Sunny recognized Ascended Dale — Winter's former partner and one of the captains of the Irregulars — by his steady bearing and equipment.

Master Knight glanced at him and nodded curtly.

Sunny grinned.

"Hey, Dale. You really are a sight for sore eyes. Say, have you always been so mesmerizing?"

The ironclad warrior stared at him for a moment, then shook his head. A calm voice resounded from behind the helmet:

"...You're not too bad yourself, Sunny."

With that, he dismissed his shield and summoned a powerful longbow instead.

"Now, would you please concentrate? We did the best we could, but it will still be a bumpy ride."

…And it was, indeed.

But in the end, the caravan still made it safely to the gates of Falcon Scott.

As the Rhino drove past the mighty fortifications of the siege capital and approached a colossal, seemingly impregnable alloy wall, Sunny couldn't help but stare at it in wonder.

Back when they had left, the city possessed robust defenses… but not nearly as fearsome.

The alloy wall was at least seventy meters tall, surrounding the whole siege capital. Its many bastions housed devastating railguns, which seemed like they had been scavenged from decommissioned

battleships. Thousands of turrets were placed along the wall's length, some aiming at the ground, some staring into the dark sky. Sunny could see lumbering MWPs patrolling the battlements.

The killing field around the city was littered with countless corpses, most of the abominations utterly torn apart. Teams of engineers moved among them, gathering soul shards and valuable materials.

The whole might of the First Army was gathered here, and the city itself had been converted into a fortress on such a scale that Sunny struggled to imagine the amount of effort, resources, and ingenuity that had gone into building these awe-inspiring fortifications.

Falcon Scott looked… like it was too large to fail.

Sunny's whole attention was concentrated on the massive gates of the siege capital, though, which the caravan was currently swiftly approaching.

As soon as the shadows of the city wall fell on him, he let out a quiet sigh and suddenly staggered, as if robbed of all strength.

An intense, overwhelming sense of relief flooded Sunny's entire body. He slowly lowered himself to the roof of the APC.

Hazy images of what had happened in the last few months flashed in his mind. The empty streets of LO49, the eerie darkness of the underground tunnel, the terrifying silhouette of Goliath rising from beneath the ocean waves… and so, so much more.

All of that was behind him now.

'We… made it?'

The gates of Falcon Scott started to open, as if to answer his question.

Indeed, Sunny was right.

He had finally managed to bring his people to safety.

***

All across the Antarctic Center, humans were retreating north, to the last bastion of their kind in this forsaken place.

…However, humans were not the only ones moving in its direction.

There was a vast, hungry cloud slowly moving between tall peaks.

Somewhere on the coast, a swarm of Nightmare Creatures was behaving strangely. Slowly and silently, the abominations were marching toward the murmuring waves. One after another, they walked into the dark water, only to disappear under its surface without a trace. A day later, the same eerie scene could be seen further north.

Far away, deep in the mountains, a river of darkness was flowing through a deep gorge. If anyone could take a closer look at it, they would see that the darkness was actually composed of numerous small, black beetles. Devouring everything on their path, the beetles were heading north, as well.

In some other place, a walking mountain seemed to be moving in the same direction. The stone giant was making its way across the ravaged landscape, the world shaking with his every step. His single eye stared blindly into the distance, as if capable of piercing thousands of kilometers to gaze at something hidden.

When the moon appeared in the night sky, the giant's eye closed.

There was also a blizzard raging somewhere far away. In its center, surrounded by a circle of absolute peace, a grotesque creature was hovering above the snow. Soon, the winds picked up, blowing furiously in a single direction…

North, north, north.

…And on a slope of a jagged mountain, a powerful abomination was preparing to feast on the remains of an adversary it had killed. Before it could, however, the shadows around it suddenly came to life, and a dark silhouette emerged from them.

The creature was tall and human-like, with jet-black bone plates covering its lithe and powerful body. Before the abomination could

react, something moved, and a fountain of blood painted the snow red, soon followed by pieces of torn flesh and viscera.

The dark creature raised the abomination's severed head with its hand, which was missing two fingers, and stared at it for a few moments. Soon, disturbing crunching sounds could be heard, drowned by the howling of the wind.

When the creature was done with its morbid meal, it lingered for a few moments, and then looked north, its eyes burning with cold hatred.

Below it, in the distance, a large city sprawled near the ocean.

...Falcon Scott.

Chapter-981: All Quiet

Rain had recently turned sixteen.

For every teenager, that was a special date. It signified more than words could describe, because from that point forward, for about two or three years, they would be vulnerable to the infection of the Spell.

She had expected to feel a large change within herself, but to Rain's surprise, everything about her seemed more or less the same.

…The world around her, however, had changed a lot.

Her daily routine was exactly as it had been before, but beneath the surface, everyone was acting differently. Her parents tried to hide their fear, but she knew how worried they really were. Her classmates were putting on a brave face, but none of them could act nearly as well as they thought they could. Even the teachers seemed much more subdued.

The mood on the streets of the city was subtly different, too.

Of course, Rain was not the center of the universe. Most of these changes had nothing to do with her, and were instead caused by the event that had everyone glued to the news portals — the grand evacuation of the Southern Quadrant. It was a historic event, after all.

Granted, none of it had truly affected NQSC. The refugees were yet to arrive, and the danger they were running from was so far away that it did not feel real. It was just that everyone seemed to have an opinion about what was happening, and there were military vehicles on the roads sometimes.

There were numerous recruitment posters all around the city, too, encouraging people to enlist in the Second Evacuation Army. The

First one was already achieving victory after victory in Antarctica, pushing back the abominable Nightmare Creatures each day. Anyone who wanted to win glory and help the victorious heroes defend humanity was invited to join the war effort.

Or at least that was what the news told them. Most people just took the propaganda at face value, believing that the Antarctica campaign was going well, but Rain had a slight advantage over them when it came to such things. Her father worked for the government, after all, and although he rarely talked about his job at home, she had learned a few things over the years.

These days, her dad looked very stressed. He looked more stressed with each passing day.

…And Sunny was gone.

Rain had grown accustomed to her eccentric neighbor coming and going as he pleased, sometimes disappearing for long stretches of time. At least she knew where he was, on this occasion… if anything, the idea of Sunny ordering soldiers around was more comical than frightening.

'Those poor people…'

She knew, of course, that her impish teacher was an actual Master. Despite Sunny's ridiculous attitude and strange antics, he was an Ascended of considerable power… not just anyone could have been a member of Changing Star's cohort.

But still, still…

Lady Nephis, Effie, Night... all of them were exalted warriors. But Sunny was a scout. Even if he was a splendid swordsman and a cunning tactician, his Aspect was not suited for battle, let alone the kind of battles that must be happening in Antarctica.

What the hell was that fool doing in the middle of a war?

And why the hell was he not answering her messages?!

'Damn it, Sunny!'

Sitting in class and finding herself unable to concentrate on the lesson — it was just a perfunctory summer course, anyway, and everyone was sleepy after an intense combat drill — Rain was staring at the screen of her communicator with dark intensity.

Things had been fine at first, but then everything went wrong. When Sunny stopped answering, she had not been too worried. For a couple of weeks.

It had been two months now, though, and there was still no sign of him.

At some point, Rain had grown concerned and, not knowing what else to do, contacted Aiko. But Aiko simply told her to relax, and that Sunny was definitely doing great somewhere out there. The petite young woman seemed to have a lot of confidence in Sunny's abilities, it seemed.

And yet, Rain was ill at ease.

It was funny… right now, she should have been worried sick about being chosen by the Spell, but Sunny's strange silence bothered her much more.

And so, Rain was staring at the screen of her communicator in the middle of a class.

Her message log would have been embarrassing, if things weren't so scary.

"Hey, did you get my last message?"

"Rain to Sunny, hello?"

"Stop ignoring me."

"Why aren't you answering?"

"Sunny?"

"If you're too busy, just say so and I'll find something more interesting to do."

"What, not even an "okay"? Come on."

"Seriously though, are you alright?"

"Did something happen?"

"If I find out that you just forgot to read my messages, you are a dead man."

"You are not really dead, are you?"

"Ha-ha, just joking."

"What the hell, you did not even congratulate me on my birthday?"

"Sunny, are you okay?"

"Answer me dammit."

"Sunny, answer me."

"I might be a little worried, so… please send me a message when you have free time."

"Please answer me."

Rain gritted her teeth and put the communicator away. She tried listening to the lecture, although it was hard to hear anything with how much her classmates were whispering around her, gossiping about this and that.

The class, the gossip, it all seemed so… inconsequential.

The whole classroom seemed surreal, actually. It was too peaceful, too warm, and too normal. Somewhere out there, millions of people were being displaced or dying. The loss of one of the four Quadrants could have long-term and catastrophic consequences for all of humanity. The same thing that was transpiring in Antarctica could just as easily happen to other continents soon.

And yet, people were behaving as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on. They just went about their lives, acting unconcerned. Did

they not understand what was happening? Did they not know that soldiers were dying on the frontline every day?

That Awakened were dying, too?

'Fools… damned fools…'

At that moment, one of her classmates turned around, leaned forward, and whispered:

"Hey, Rain. Why are you so down lately? Wanna go eat something spicy after class? There's probably going to be food rationing for a while after those refugees arrive, so this might be our last chance to…"

Before Rain knew what she was doing, an angry response flew out of her mouth:

"Is food all you're thinking about?!"

She blinked, realizing that she was standing, and that the whole class was staring at her. Apparently, she had forgotten to keep her voice down… and to remain in her seat…

The teacher gave Rain a bewildered look.

"...Why, yes. This topic might not seem too interesting to you youngsters, but it would be unprofessional for me to be thinking about something else while presenting it. Now, please sit down and behave, young miss. Where are your manners?"

Embarrassed, Rain returned to her seat and turned to the window.

The class continued, and the gossip continued, too. Only this time, she was the subject of the whispers.

'Great…'

***

On her way home, Rain passed a familiar grey house. She paused for a few moments, looking at the porch where a certain insufferable

Master could often be seen in the past, drinking coffee and acting as if he did not have a single worry in the world.

The porch was empty, and the house was empty, too.

With a sigh, she turned away and continued walking.

'Why do I care about that idiot, anyway? Damned Sunny. Even if he sends me a message now, I won't answer.'

At that moment, her communicator vibrated, announcing that there was a new notification.

Rain glanced at it absentmindedly, and then suddenly froze.

There was a new message on the screen.

It read:

"Sunny: Gods! What is up with all these messages? Are you a stalker? I was just stuck in an area without a network connection for a while, there was no need to assault my inbox! Anyway… happy belated birthday, I guess. How are you doing?

Data transfers are limited where I am now, so I'll be short. I'm fine. Oh… and I received another medal. Pretty cool, right?"

Rain stared at the screen for a few moments, then took a shaky breath and started typing furiously.

Chapter-982: Dark, Empty, and Silent

Cassie opened her eyes in the darkness.

For a few moments, she was disoriented by the onslaught of colors and sensations.

She was looking at the bright blue sky and the sea of white clouds rolling beneath the Ivory Tower. Sunlight was caressing her skin, and gentle winds were singing into her ears.

She was enveloped in heat, red sparks flying from a crucible where molten steel was shining with an incandescent glow. A tired voice was chanting something in an ancient language, the alien words drowning in the clamor of the forge.

She was locked in a small office, reading a document. The paper was cold to the touch, and smelled of fresh ink. Her vision was blurry from the lack of sleep, and her heart was heavy. The contents of the document were grave…

There were other places, other people. It took her some time to find herself among the strangers.

Cassie's was the only world that had no colors, and no shapes. It was dark, empty, and silent.

She could feel the soft fabric of her pajamas touching her skin, and the warmth of her bed. The smell was all wrong, though. Wrong, but nice and familiar.

'...Where am I?'

She frowned, and then remembered. These were not her chambers in

the Ivory Tower. She had returned to the waking world, and was now in her room.

She was home…

Cassie allowed the perspectives of various people marked by her Ability to fade into the background, and concentrated on her own.

She rose from the bed and went to the bathroom to take a shower. The layout of her room was orderly and familiar, and she was careful to keep everything in its proper place. That was why she could orient herself without problem here, not needing any help. This darkness was safe.

It had not always been that way, however. For the first few weeks after receiving her Flaw, Cassie had been a walking collection of bruises.

…And then, the solstice was upon her.

After a short, but pleasant shower — way better than anything they had been able to arrange in the Ivory Tower — she walked over to her wardrobe and got dressed. Her clothes were organized according to a strict system, with a tactile script tag added to each hanger to label colors, so Cassie could find anything she wanted quickly.

Finally ready, she left her room and headed downstairs.

Outside of her own space, she felt less confident. Her parents tried to be mindful of her Flaw, but it was still something unfamiliar to them. In the years after becoming blind, Cassie spent most of her time someplace else, after all. How could they have grown accustomed to it?

She was almost sure that there would not be a piece of furniture moved, or a random item left carelessly in the way. But the mere possibility of stumbling into something or falling down made her feel tense. Cassie felt… felt like a stranger in her own home.

She hated that feeling.

Of course, nothing here could really harm her. Her Ascended

physique was beyond being bruised by a mundane accident, but today was a special day. She wanted to make it perfect.

Cassie hesitated for a little, and then activated her Awakened Ability. With so many perspective mediums out there, her essence was in a state of delicate equilibrium. She had to be mindful not to spend more than she could passively replenish, and indulging herself without a real reason was not very responsible.

'...Just for a little bit.'

Immediately, the world changed.

Cassie was standing near the stairs, but she was also cautiously descending them. One step, two steps, three steps…

Cassie lowered her foot to the first step, but she was also on the fourth step.

Cassie reached the fourth step, but she was also on the landing.

Her hand was sliding along the banister, but it was also hanging by her side. She did not smell anything in particular, but she could also feel the scent of her mom's shampoo and… flowers?

Cassie was still on the stairs, but she also felt a pang of pain as her shin slammed into something hard, followed by the sound of a glass vase shattering as it hit the floor.

'There was nothing there before…'

Cassie moved to the side, avoiding the unfamiliar stand, and leaned forward a little to smell the flowers. The vase was standing still, and perfectly whole.

At the same time, there was the sound of an opening door, and her mother's scent became stronger.

Cassie turned to the closed door.

The door opened, and her mother walked inside from the street.

"Ah! My baby is awake!"

Cassie smiled and released her Awakened Ability. Instead, she sent her essence forward and substituted her sight with her mom's. Immediately, the full room came into view, including an unfamiliar wooden stand with a beautiful vase of natural flowers on top of it.

…She saw herself, too.

Cassie could see her own face, but not that of her mother.

She frowned a little.

'My skirt is wrinkled…'

"Happy Birthday! I can't believe it, my lovely daughter is turning twenty!"

Cassie smiled. She didn't feel like she was twenty… she felt like she was two hundred.

Before she could say anything, her mom enveloped her in a hug.

"I am so glad that you managed to come! Work is work, but a young lady like you should not forget about her poor, old parents. Would it kill you to visit more often? Ah, what am I saying? Visit, what visit? This is still your home, you know!

You live here!"

Cassie's smile widened.

"I know."

"And where are these friends of yours? What do you mean, no one is coming to the party? I get it that Lady Nephis might be busy, but what about the others? That young man, Sunny, the one you always mention? Where's he?"

Cassie remained silent for a while.

"...He's busy, too."

"Ah, that daughter of mine is too nice. If it were me, I'd give these so-called friends a piece of my mind… missing a birthday party is never okay!"

Cassie just hugged her mom tighter. She couldn't help but cling to her a little longer than she should have.

...That was because Cassie knew exactly how many more birthdays they would be able to celebrate together.

She knew when her mother would die, and how.

She knew when her father would die, too.

She even knew the day of her own death, and where she would be entombed.

Cassie knew a great number of things, and because of that, she felt sorry.

Fate was not easy to break, and it could not be broken without paying a price.

"Alright, baby, let me go so that I can cook you a very special birthday breakfast."

She reluctantly ended the hug and sighed.

"I am not a baby, you know. I am an Ascended already."

Her mom laughed.

"Who says that an Ascended can't be a little baby? Now tell me what you want for breakfast!"

Cassie masterfully hid her sorrow and put a big, bright smile on her face.

"How about eggs? With bacon?"

Her mother was already walking to the kitchen.

"No problem! We only have synthetic bacon, though. Will that be

alright, Miss Ascended?"

Cassie followed, careful not to smash into anything else.

"That's the best kind!"

There was a digital clock in the kitchen, and when her mother glanced at it in passing, the time was ten in the morning.

Cassie quietly sat down and turned to the clock, even though she could not see it.

A few minutes later, when a delicious smell filled the kitchen, she sighed and stared into the distance, as if able to see something far, far away.

Her smile faltered a little.

'It is starting, then…'

Chapter-983: The Fall of Falcon Scott (1)

Falcon Scott was not the largest city in the Southern Quadrant, but it served an important role. Situated dangerously close to the ocean, it served as an entry point to the Antarctic Center. A constant stream of people and cargo used to flow through it, making it the heart of the infrastructure of the region.

The city itself sprawled across the foothills of the mountain range, perched on top of tall cliffs. At the bottom of the cliffs, an independent port-fortress stood at the edge of the water, surrounded by its own ring of walls.

The fortress was much larger and better fortified than the one Sunny had departed the Northern Quadrant from, and the First Army did not spare any resources to reinforce it even further.

The port was connected to the city by a chain of industrial elevator platforms, which could haul a formidable amount of weight up and down. Due to that, the fortress could be supported by artillery fire from the city wall, and even if it fell, the enemy would have to scale the tall vertical barrier of the cliffs under a rain of defensive fire.

…Not that losing the port was an option, in the current situation.

Several alloy leviathans were currently anchored near the fortress, swaying on the waves and flooding the dark ocean with the moving beams of powerful searchlights. The city itself was grossly overcrowded, housing ten times its intended population. After all remaining siege capitals of the Antarctic Center had been evacuated here, Falcon Scott sheltered close to two hundred million people.

All of them were waiting for their turn to board the battleships and be transported over the strait, to the much better protected expanse

of Eastern Antarctica, where the First Army was still maintaining a semblance of control. One of the four naval convoys had been reassigned to ferry people over, but even with the prodigious capacity of the massive vessels, it was going to take a while.

The fact that several of the battleships, like Naeve's former berth and the Ariadne, had been lost to the ravages of the Chain of Nightmares did not make the process faster.

'...That's more than half of the population of NQSC. Crazy.'

Sunny was looking at the live image of the city, which was projected onto a false window in one of the offices of the local government's complex. The city shone with a myriad of lights in the cold darkness of the polar night, with the ghostly aurora swirling eerily above. There were too many people everywhere, and most of them looked lost, disoriented, or outright defeated.

The larger part of the complex, of course, was located underground, so the window had to be fake. The complex also housed the regional branch of Army Command, which was why Sunny had received instructions to visit today.

With a sigh, he turned away from the window, walked to the conference table, and sat down.

Sunny was still wearing the Puppeteer's Shroud, but the difference was that he had been given time to sleep, take a proper shower, and eat a full meal. Much more important than that, the weight of tens of thousands of souls was not pressing down on him anymore. All in all, he looked pretty refreshed.

'Where is she…'

He did not have to wait long. A minute or two later, the door opened, and Master Jet walked inside.

Soul Reaper looked pretty much the same as she had the last time he saw her. Granted, she was wearing the usual bodysuit instead of battle armor today… ah, the bodysuit… but other than that, it did not seem like the hellish months of the Antarctic campaign had

impacted her in a negative way.

Noticing Sunny, Jet smiled.

"Well, if it's not young Master Sunless, valiant slayer of abominations and savior of men. It's good to have you back, Sunny."

Sunny forced out a smile in return.

"Yeah… it's good to be back. How have the last two months treated you? Because, you know, I had it a bit rough."

Master Jet took a seat at the head of the table and gave him a humorous look.

"You have no one but yourself to blame. Who asked you to be such an overachiever? I sent you to retrieve one man, and you brought me forty thousand instead. I must say, if everyone here had this kind of attitude, the Chain of Nightmares would have been over in a week. Hell, we might have reclaimed America by now."

Sunny glanced at her darkly.

"No thanks."

Considering how many refugees were currently in Falcon Scott, forty thousand was not a large number. However, a few of those thousands were actual soldiers, and a couple more were experienced sailors. That was actually significant enough to make a splash, so the news of his return spread far and wide.

All of them — both the refugees and the soldiers — also seemed to be very fond of telling tales about the Devil's many exploits. Sunny was not entirely sure what kind of reputation he had earned, but he definitely had a reputation now. All throughout the city, people were familiar with his name.

…For better or worse.

"Oh… thanks for sending me your crow, by the way. It helped a lot."

Jet grinned, but before she could say anything, the door opened

again. Winter and Dale entered and took their seats. With only the four Irregulars in the office, it seemed a bit empty.

Sunny looked around.

"...Where are Randall and Jesse?"

Master Jet lingered for a moment.

"They're dead."

He grew quiet.

"Oh."

Soul Reaper sighed, then picked up her datapad, scrolled through a few documents, and addressed them in a bright voice:

"Well then, let's begin. There's going to be a big strategy meeting in an hour for everyone important enough to attend, but before that, I should update you on the current situation. In the next few days, Falcon Scott is going to be besieged by an endless sea of abominations. Our task is simple: we must ensure that it doesn't fall for at least three weeks…"

Chapter-984: The Fall of Falcon Scott (2)

The situation was both clear and grim. Sunny already knew some of the things that Jet told them, but some were a complete surprise.

The First Army was planning to withdraw from the Antarctic Center, taking its entire population with them. The previous plan of hunkering down in a number of fortified siege capitals for gradual evacuation had been abandoned, or rather postponed — it was going to be enacted eventually, but not before everyone was safely relocated to Eastern Antarctica.

Eastern Antarctica was doing much better than the central region of the Quadrant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was much larger and more densely populated than the Center, with better terrain. That was why the First Army contingent sent there was several times more powerful.

The field army Sunny was a part of numbered a hundred thousand soldiers, with around five thousand Awakened accompanying them… or rather, had numbered. Now, there was maybe half of them left. The three field armies operating in Eastern Antarctica, on the other hand, had three hundred thousand soldiers and fifteen thousand Awakened, not counting the local forces.

If that was not enough, two of the three Saints participating in the campaign were stationed there, as well. The emissary of the Song clan and the government Transcendent were both assigned to the larger landmass, with Sky Tide alone responsible for the whole of the Antarctic Center.

The Chain of Nightmares also seemed to be hitting the central region especially hard…

Lastly, and perhaps most pivotally, the Antarctic Center was where the Winter Beast had appeared. That titan alone was responsible for numerous deaths, since its influence had collapsed the communication network across the entire landmass. If it were not for the fact that Saint Tyris was a direct counter to its powers, the situation could have been even worse…

Sadly, she could only contain the Winter Beast, not slay it.

In any case, Army Command had decided to cut its losses and concentrate all the remaining human forces in the Quadrant on defending a single region. The first detachments of the Second Army were scheduled to arrive at the end of the month, so their decision at least seemed prudent.

…The problem, of course, was that the battered defenders of the Antarctic Center had to survive the relocation first.

There were close to two hundred million people in Falcon Scott, and relocating them to Eastern Antarctica was going to take at least three weeks. The strait was not very wide, so ferrying refugees across it would be ten times faster than trying to evacuate them all the way to the Northern Quadrant. Still, there were just too many of them to accomplish anything in a timely manner.

So, the remaining members of the field army had to make sure that the siege capital would survive those weeks under constant siege by the Nightmare Creatures.

Master Jet leaned back.

"We resisted three large-scale assaults yesterday, and there are probably going to be four or five today. That number will only increase in the future. We will have to stop counting them eventually, I think, since it'll just be one uninterrupted onslaught of abominations, twenty-four hours a day."

Winter and Dale glanced at each other. Eventually, the Ascended sharpshooter sighed.

"...It's not the number of Nightmare Creatures that worries me. It's the

particularly powerful bastards that have nowhere to go but here, now."

Soul Reaper shrugged.

"We'll have to develop strategies against each one. That is what the big meeting is for, though, so let's not speak about it yet…"

Sunny checked out of the conversation a little, looking at the empty chairs around the table.

Davis, Randall, and Jesse… three of the six Irregular captains were now dead. He did not know them too well, but their loss still seemed like a bad omen. Especially Randall. Somehow, Sunny imagined that the grizzled veteran would be the last of them to go.

Jesse had seemed like a very nice person, too.

'Curse it...'

It did not slip his attention that the three fallen Masters were the ones who specialized in direct offense — be it frontal assaults, hit-and-run tactics, or stealth operations. The ones who survived were Sunny, Winter, and Dale — a utility specialist, a ranged fighter, and a defensive powerhouse.

If there was a philosophical lesson in all that, he was too disturbed and saddened right now to figure it out.

"...speaking of that… hey, Sunny, are you listening?"

Sunny glanced at Master Jet and blinked a couple of times.

"Yeah, a little."

Soul Reaper chuckled, then threw something at him. He caught it, then looked at a small box in his hand in confusion. Opening it, Sunny saw an iron medal with an image of a burning heart etched into it.

The medal looked very ostentatious, if a bit solemn. Much more elaborate than the previous one he had received, with the attached

ribbon painted in rich red. However… it was made of simple iron… so it couldn't be too valuable.

He looked at Master Jet with a silent question, making her laugh.

"Gods, don't you know anything? That is the Order of Humanity, Sunny, the highest military honor a person can receive. Congratulations. You are officially a hero."

He frowned a little, prompting Jet to smile.

"...And yes, it comes with contribution points. Lots of them. You have also been promoted to major. That comes with an increased stipend, too."

Sunny relaxed, and then looked at the iron medal with a bit of fondness.

"I do know some things, actually…"

He doubted that he would be able to use his considerable amount of accumulated contribution points in Falcon Scott, since logistics here had to be under dire strain. Most resources would instantly be distributed to those who needed them, including valuable Memories… or not-so-valuable Memories, for that matter, considering how many new Sleepers had to be armed.

Once they reached Eastern Antarctica, however…

Master Jet glanced at her datapad and sighed.

"It's time for us to head to a bigger office. The strategy meeting is about to start."

Sunny stood up, glanced at the false window one last time, and headed for the door.

'If we reach Eastern Antarctica, I mean...'

Chapter-985: The Fall of Falcon Scott (3)

The next conference room was much larger, and there were even some refreshments for the participants of the meeting. Sunny found the darkest corner of the room to settle in and tore open a packet of sweetened snacks — after making sure that there was no honey involved in their creation, of course.

Chewing on something that felt like a dried berry, he glanced around.

The most prominent figures of the First Army were arriving one after another. There were a few mundane commanders, but most of them were Ascended. Eventually, he counted no less than twenty-one Masters — including the four Irregulars.

Naeve and Roan were also present, so he gave them a wave.

Master Jet, who was relaxing on a chair next to Sunny, gave him a curious look.

"What interesting friends you keep, Sunny."

He shrugged.

"What about them?"

Soul Reaper chuckled.

"No, nothing. It's just that here's a room full of government Ascended, and the two you're waving to are both connected to the great clans. If I didn't know you better, I'd think that you have a bit of a fondness for social climbing."

Sunny scoffed.

"The only climbing I'm fond of is… actually, never mind that. Weren't you the one who helped me broker a deal to get out of joining Valor, anyway? Surely you understand that a precious jewel like me doesn't need connections to earn the favor of a great clan…"

Hearing Jet laugh quietly, he added with a straight face:

"Oh… thanks for that, by the way. The mere thought that I could have been living like a prince somewhere in Bastion instead of spending quality time here in Antarctica makes me feel slightly nauseous. Who needs luxury when you can have unlimited military rations, right?"

Winter stared at him from behind her sunglasses and grinned.

"I did not know that Valor tried to recruit you. And you refused, huh… was she really ugly?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"No? What do you mean?"

Winter shook her head.

"I mean the bride they offered, of course, to marry you into the clan. Either she was really ugly, or you are really stupid… huh, I guess I have my answer?"

He opened his mouth to retort, but at that moment, the door opened, and two people entered the room. The atmosphere inside instantly changed.

The first of them was Saint Tyris, just as striking and stern as Sunny remembered her. The second was a man with smooth ebony skin and perfectly white hair, his eyes glinting with shades of indigo and deep blue.

Sunny had only seen the man once, and from afar, but he knew who the stranger was.

Bloodwave, a Transcendent of the House of Night. He was in charge of the naval convoy that had delivered the field army to the Antarctic

Center, and the Saint Sunny had witnessed diving into the black water as a monstrous killer whale once.

'Oh! He is also in Falcon Scott?'

It made sense, in retrospect. The naval convoy was assigned to ferry the refugees across the strait, so of course, Bloodwave was involved. He was most likely in charge of making sure that nothing destroyed the ships during the relocation.

The emissaries of the House of Night were not a part of the First Army, which was why Sunny failed to realize that there was actually a fourth Transcendent in the Southern Quadrant right now… no, there had to be even more, since the other three convoys also required a mighty guardian to protect them.

Initially, they were not supposed to involve themselves with the ground operation, but the situation seemed to have changed somehow.

Sky Tide greeted everyone gathered in the room, then proceeded to take a seat at the head of the table. Bloodwave simply leaned on the wall after exchanging a few words with Naeve, forcing a few Masters to shift uncomfortably as his presence brushed against them.

…Sunny felt it, too.

'What an awesome man.'

As he studied the mysterious Saint through his shadows, Sky Tide started the briefing.

"You all know what must be done…"

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Without wasting any time, Saint Tyris briefly described the overall state of the First Army contingent, the scope of tasks in front of them, as well as the enemy forces arrayed against them. Her voice was calm and composed, as though they weren't facing an existential threat of dreadful proportions.

To be honest, Sunny struggled to imagine Sky Tide losing composure in any circumstance. What would that even look like?

'...Actually, I hope to never find out.'

Most of what she told them were things that he already knew to some extent, but hearing all of it listed in a structured manner was helpful to get a solid glimpse of the big picture. The big picture… did not look too good.

Pointing to the projected map of the city and its surroundings, Saint Tyris continued:

"...now that Falcon Scott is the only target in the region, the infighting between Nightmare Creatures will increase drastically. The terrain limits their approach, which means that various swarms and tribes of abominations will have to compete with each other for the right to attack the wall. Many will be slaughtered long before they reach us."

Her gaze was cold and heavy.

"So, we should not worry too much about being overwhelmed with pure numbers. What we do need to worry about, however, is that only the most brutal, lethal, and powerful creatures are going to make it through. The main purpose of this meeting is to identify priority targets among these creatures and come up with a way to deal with them."

Saint Tyris gestured to the projections, where several images replaced the city map.

"The preliminary analysis shows that these Nightmare Creatures represent the most acute threat to this city"

Sunny looked at the images, feeling a grim weight settle on his heart.

He was already familiar with most of them.

A cloud of flying vermin devouring the landscape. An unclear image of a river of darkness flowing through a deep gorge. A still image of the LO49 facility. A hazy drawing of a grotesque beast hiding behind

a veil of snow.

And a walking mountain with a single inhuman eye, emerging from a sea of incandescent lava to attack a vast city.

Sunny sighed.

'...Three weeks, huh?'

Chapter-986: The Fall of Falcon Scott (4)

Saint Tyris waited for a few moments, then spoke again:

"Some of you have already faced one of these monsters. Master Sunless over there has even survived encountering four out of five…"

Without prompting, everyone in the room turned to stare at him, their expressions varying from pity to astonishment. He even heard a few whispers:

"Four? And he's still alive?"

"That kid must be cursed or something."

"Devil's own luck, ha…"

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Ah, yes. Using this moment, I might as well sincerely thank Army Command for giving me the opportunity to complete my collection and get to know the Winter Beast, as well."

A wave of laughter spread through the room.

Sky Tide gave him a stern look.

"I'll mark you as a volunteer, then."

Before Sunny could protest, she continued:

"The first target is a swarm entity known as the Devouring Cloud. Our diviners were able to determine that it is not a powerful Nightmare Creature, per se, but instead the remains of one. The Devouring Cloud was most likely a Fallen Terror, one that had its main

consciousness destroyed at some point in the past. The swarm of its brood remains, however, and that is what we need to counter."

She glanced at the Irregulars.

"Master Winter, considering your proficiency in ranged and area-of-effect attacks, you will be in charge of bolstering the city defenses when it comes to deflecting aerial threats."

Winter nodded. After explaining a few more details, Saint Tyris continued:

"The second target is a creature that was designated as the Heart of Darkness. Not a lot is known about it, except for the fact that it is composed of numerous insect-like drones, wielding powers connected to elemental darkness and possibly spatial distortion. The knowledge of this being was brought to us by the First Irregular Company."

That would be Sunny and the members of his cohort, who had been diligently reporting everything about the enemies the convoy encountered during their visits to the Dream Realm.

Sky Tide looked in the direction of the four Irregulars.

"The Heart of Darkness has been present in the Antarctic Center since before the Chain of Nightmares. Its Rank and Class are unknown, but the current theory is that the Irregulars disturbed the creature's evolution to titan… if so, we might have avoided an even bigger disaster. In any case, the people most suited to deal with that threat are…"

She named three unfamiliar First Army Ascended. Apparently, their Aspects would work well against a myriad of murderous, darkness-infused beetles. Sunny was happy to hear that he would not have to face the damned insects himself again.

…If things went according to plan.

"The third target was designated as the Terror of LO49. Once again, its exact Rank and Class are unknown, although the creature is most likely to be a Corrupted Terror. It is responsible for destroying the battleship Ariadne, as well as massacring the garrison of the LO49

installation. Master Sunless is the only known survivor of the attack, so he is the best person to inform us about this threat."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"There's not much to tell. The bastard hides underwater and kills people by luring them into the ocean with immensely powerful mind manipulation. It also places a mind hex on everyone else to make them ignore the victims. That is the pattern of behavior that I witnessed, which is not to say that the creature does not have other means of attack. You can read the details in the reports we submitted."

He thought a little, and then added:

"If there is one strange thing about that Terror, it is that it emerged from the Gate alone. It does not seem to have an entourage of weaker Nightmare Creatures to defend it, either, which might be a vulnerability. Oh… also, there has to be some kind of limitation to its ability to wipe out large groups of people. Otherwise, it would not have waited weeks to kill everyone at LO49."

Sky Tide nodded.

"Saint Bloodwave, Master Naeve. Since the creature appears to be aquatic in nature, it is going to be your responsibility to hunt it down. The Terror cannot be allowed to approach the city."

The emissaries of the House of Night simply nodded.

…Sunny hoped that they had enough mind-protection Memories.

Meanwhile, Saint Tyris turned to the image of the Winter Beast. A hint of a contempt appeared on her beautiful face.

"The Winter Beast… was recently confirmed to be a Corrupted Titan. I can't kill it, but I will contain it. Dealing with the creature will be my responsibility."

Many of the people in the room paled at the mention of the creature's Rank. Master Roan especially seemed to have a grave expression.

Ignoring the somber mood, Sky Tide turned to the last image.

"Which leaves us with the Fallen Titan Goliath, the creature responsible for the obliteration of Erebus Field. Do note that, as of now, we have only experienced its physical might. The exact nature of Goliath's powers is still unclear, so… we do not know enough to determine how to destroy him."

The Masters grew silent, staring at the frightening image of a stone colossus walking across a desolate landscape.

…In that silence, there was suddenly a calm voice:

"I'll kill Goliath."

Everyone turned around, staring at Sunny with confused expressions. He smiled.

"What? The bastard owes me a new armor. Plus, I've never killed a titan before… should be an interesting experience."

Most of them shook their heads.

"This is not a good time for empty boasts, kid."

Sunny shrugged.

"As good a time as any."

Saint Tyris studied him for a few moments, then turned away.

"In any case…"

Before she could finish, though, several communicators in the room notified their owners about a received message.

Sunny raised an eyebrow. That was… unusual. Falcon Scott was still in the area of effect of the Winter Beast, so there was no network connection anywhere inside the city walls.

There was a powerful communication array, though, connected via a chain of special relays to Eastern Antarctica. Its bandwidth was very

limited and mostly monopolized by Army Command — Sunny had to spend a considerable sum of contribution points to receive a small quota, which allowed him to get in contact with Rain.

Still, the quota was small enough for him to have to count symbols when composing messages, and instead of a constant connection, data packets were uploaded and downloaded twice a day, according to a strict schedule.

He glanced at his own communicator to check time. It was around ten in the morning in the Northern Quadrant, which, translated to local time, would be... nowhere near the scheduled activation period of the array.

'Interesting…'

Even more interesting were the people who received the message. There were only three of them — Sky Tide, Bloodwave… and Soul Reaper Jet.

Saint Tyris read the message and frowned slightly. The other Transcendent sighed, then briefly showed his communicator to Naeve and hid it. Master Jet glanced at the screen and showed no reaction whatsoever, remaining in her usual relaxed pose.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then leaned toward her and asked quietly:

"What was that about?"

Master Jet glanced at him and shrugged.

"A Saint died this morning in the Dream Realm, while heroically defending a Citadel from some vicious Nightmare Creature. One of Valor's."

Sunny was taken aback a little. Saints did not die too often…

"Some vicious Nightmare Creature, huh?"

Soul Reaper smiled a little.

"Yeah… things are going to accelerate a lot now. Not that it matters to us here. For now…"

Chapter-987: The Fall of Falcon Scott (5)

Sunny was sitting on the battlement of the defensive wall, looking at the apocalyptic sight of a giant horde of Nightmare Creatures advancing on the city. There were so many of them that it seemed as though the ground itself was moving, flowing forward as it seethed and churned.

The darkness surrounding the city was chased away by dozens of flare rockets, which slowly drifted down from the black sky like bright falling stars. On the ground, rivers of flame were devouring the carcasses of the abominations that had been slain in the previous assaults.

The incendiary mixture burned long and hot, but luckily enough, the stench of scorched flesh could hardly reach the top of the wall.

Pillars of smoke rose into the sky, twisting as they struggled to support its weight. And above it all, obscured by dark clouds, ghostly lights of the aurora swirled with shades of crimson.

The battle was about to begin.

As the advancing sea of Nightmare Creatures crossed an invisible line, the powerful mass drivers installed on the bastions of Falcon Scott came to life, flashing with electric light as they sent heavy tungsten rounds flying forward with terrifying speed. The rail gun fire was accompanied by deafening thunderclaps, making the whole wall shake and vibrate.

Even though the tungsten rounds were not explosive, they impacted the horde with enough force to produce flashes of light and a devastating shockwaves that pulverized dozens of Nightmare Creatures and cut bloody swathes through their mass.

The horde, however, continued forward unperturbed. A moment later, the breaches created by the first salvo of the rail guns were entirely gone, and the abominations rushed forward with murderous frenzy.

As the mass drivers accumulated new charges, the heavy-caliber turrets placed along the wall joined the fray. Long tongues of fire bloomed from their barrels, and thousands upon thousands of bullets filled the air. The shining streams of them twisted as they slid across the horde, decimating countless creatures. The noise of the turret barrage was dire and cacophonous.

Sunny winced unhappily.

War was a lot of things, but mostly it was… loud.

He glanced at the seventy-meter drop below him, then concentrated on his hands again. His fingers were spread apart and moving, as if performing an elaborate dance. From the side, it looked as if Sunny had either gone crazy or was trying to cast some strange hex.

Of course, he was doing neither. Instead, he was weaving shadow strings — it was just that the slowly forming threads of essence were only visible to him.

Luckily, the members of his cohort were long accustomed to their leader's eccentric antics, so they were not paying it any attention. Instead, all six were tensely observing the approaching horde.

Once the hundreds of MWPs stationed on top of the wall braced themselves and opened fire, Samara placed the barrel of her rifle on the battlement and leaned into the scope. Before she could charge a shot, however, Sunny placed his hand on her shoulder and shook his head.

…His third hand, that was, since he was currently using four — two of them made of flesh, two of them made of shadows.

Samara glanced at him with a slight frown.

"Sir? Why not?"

Sunny continued to weave shadow strings as he answered:

"There's no need. The garrison has the situation under control, for now, so don't get involved unless the Nightmare Creatures scale the wall. Conserve your essence."

He lingered for a moment, then added:

"According to the latest reports, the Devouring Cloud is only one day away from reaching Falcon Scott. We are going to need all our strength tomorrow."

The Irregulars shifted uncomfortably, remembering their last brush with the flying swarm. Sunny, meanwhile, disregarded his own advice and turned his attention back to the invisible threads of essence.

The battle progressed more or less as he expected. The horde advanced despite suffering heavy losses, and not long after the MWPs unleashed a hail of rounds and missiles into the mass of abominations, the mundane soldiers joined, followed by Awakened sorcerers and archers.

The siege was a strange one, considering that most of the defensive measures of the city were only able to deal with Dormant and Awakened Nightmare Creatures. To slay the Fallen ones, Awakened fighters had to abandon the safety of the battlements and sortie out, emerging either from heavily armored hatches in the wall or from hidden tunnels stretching beneath the killing field.

Those tunnels were also used to intercept those abominations that were capable of burrowing through the ground, and could be easily collapsed in case the enemy took control of one.

If a Corrupted Nightmare Creature appeared, the Masters were sent out to destroy it.

It all sounded well-planned and controlled, but the actual reality was pure chaos and mayhem. Abominations possessed all kinds of vile powers, so each assault was unpredictable and dangerous. Each victory took a lot of human lives to achieve.

Noticing a line of hatches open lower down the wall and a dozen swift figures jump out of them, Sunny sighed. He caught a glimpse of Dale's heavy armor, which meant that something truly dangerous had emerged. Army Command was strangely protective of the Irregulars, mostly keeping them in reserve for now. They were probably meant to do their part of the dying once the priority targets showed up.

Considering that Knight's cohort had been unleashed, though, the current battle must have been going less smoothly than he thought.

And indeed, not long after Dale eliminated his target and retreated, the horde broke through the protective barrage and reached the wall. It seemed that the abominations had learned to use the piles of corpses left behind by the previous assaults as cover.

The lowest part of the wall was also the most reinforced. All materials retrieved from the carcasses of well-armored Nightmare Creatures went into making it hard to breach, so the horde stalled at the bottom for a while, suffering under a flood of bullets and explosive projectiles.

Then, however, the abominations started to pile one on top of another, forming morbid ziggurats of bodies. The ziggurats grew, rising higher and higher as more Nightmare Creatures climbed the ladders made of writhing flesh. Ten meters, then twenty, then thirty… eventually, it became clear that there was a substantial risk that the horde would scale the wall.

With a sigh, Sunny paused his weaving and stood up, easily holding his balance on top of the battlement. A black bow appeared in his hand, and an arrow that seemed to be made of lightning ignited on its string.

'They know how to build siege towers now?'

Drawing the bow, Sunny lingered for a moment, and then sent the Strike of Thunder flying down.

A moment later, the howls of the Nightmare Creatures tore through the clamor of the battle, and the Spell whispered into his ear like a sonorous choir.

The battle raged on…

Chapter-988: The Fall of Falcon Scott (6)

…And it still raged on by the time Sunny and his cohort were done with their shift. Or maybe it was already another assault — by now, it was often hard to tell where one attack ended and a second one began.

Descending from the wall, the Irregulars passed through the busy camp below. Lumbering loaders were racing to send heavy ammunition containers up, wounded soldiers were being triaged and tended to, fresh reinforcements were waiting their turn to enter the elevators. Here and there, a damaged MWP stood, being hastily repaired by a crew of technicians.

Leaving the staging area, they soon reached the Rhino. The mighty vehicle was not in the best shape, but it could still be used to get around the city. Plus, while the members of the cohort had decided to bunk in comfortable barracks, Sunny chose to remain in the familiar APC. He had even learned how to drive it… well, more or less… from Luster.

"Are you coming with us, Captain? Oh… sorry… Major."

Kim looked away awkwardly after asking the question. Sunny simply shook his head.

"Not today. I have a couple of errands to run, so just take the Rhino to the barracks and then park it in the usual spot. Oh… and rest well. Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

Although the cohort had ended up not doing much today, everyone was still tired. They quickly drove off, leaving Sunny alone.

…Day four of their stay in Falcon Scott was coming to an end.

Circulating his essence to hasten its replenishment rate, Sunny walked for a few minutes, breathing in the cold air as the hum of distant explosions washed over him. Then, he jumped on the step of a moving transport and allowed it to carry him closer to his destination.

The vistas of a city at war floated past him, too many refugees crammed into too few buildings. Everyone was doing their best to create some sort of passable environment for themselves and their neighbors… but there were a lot of problems, too.

Most of these people were shaken and traumatized, some very close to breaking down. There were a lot of conflicts and violent outbursts, and even more dark feelings.

…There were a lot of Nightmare Creatures being born from the bodies of failed Aspirants, as well, since the Spell ran rampant among the refugees and there were not nearly enough soldiers to find all the infected before the worst happened.

A suffocating atmosphere of fear, tension, and sorrow permeated the air.

And yet, people lived on. Their resilience and adaptability triumphed over everything, allowing them to endure and even find moments of happiness in this hell.

Sunny saw plenty of smiles, heard plenty of laughter, and witnessed many small details of how the refugees were handling their changed conditions while looking forward to being evacuated.

'They still have hope…'

Eventually, he jumped down and walked the rest of the way on foot, reaching a section of the staging area where large white warehouses stood in several rows, surrounded by a mass of activity.

That was where scavenged materials were being processed and refined for the use of the First Army.

A tired-looking engineer met him at the gate.

"Major Sunless?"

Sunny nodded and allowed the man to lead him toward a particular row of warehouses.

"Yeah, we received your request. The approval came fast enough, so as long as you have enough contribution points, you can cut a good chunk for yourself. Not that I know what you need it for… usually, it's the mundanes we arm with processed material that dream of wielding Memories, not the other way around…"

Sunny smiled.

The warehouses were full of Nightmare Creature carcasses — those valuable enough to be retrieved from the battlefield and processed by the army.

The corpse of the Remnant of the Jade Queen — the Corrupted Tyrant he and Sky Tide had killed — had been placed here once, for example. The incredibly durable jade carapace of the monstrous beetle was then refined and used to reinforce a section of the wall.

Most of the processed material was instantly used to strengthen the fortifications of the city or the First Army itself. There were all kinds of things that could be done with various parts of Nightmare Creatures, from crafting melee weapons and upgrading the armored shells of MWPs to powering exotic spelltech mechanisms.

That was why Sunny had to push his weight around, bargain a little, and spend a bunch of contribution points to receive a modest quota.

Studying the warehouses, he asked:

"There was a Corrupted Devil yesterday that managed to breach the wall. Where is it kept?"

The engineer stared at him for a few moments.

"Uh… I'm sorry, sir. I have no idea which one of them breached the wall. We just receive the carcasses and come up with ways of dismantling them. Another team then thinks of a way to actually use the parts."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Makes sense. Just show me the Corrupted material you have, then."

He was led through several warehouses, studying a series of ghastly corpses, each one more frightening than the last.

There was a creature that resembled a giant mole covered in heavy plates of bone armor, and a creature that looked like a mass of spikes, with a small skeletal body hidden somewhere in its center. There was a carcass of something that seemed like an eight-legged metal tick, the size of a house, and a stone sphere covered with bumps that looked eerily like human faces.

'Damn…'

Finally, Sunny found what he was looking for. In the spacious warehouse, a large carcass was laying on the floor, surrounded by alloy scaffolding. The creature was vaguely humanoid in shape, bone-white, with countless rows of needles bristling from its back.

Each needle was about three meters long, wide enough for him to barely be able to grasp it with a hand, and weighed too much for several adult men to lift it. They were made of a strange material that seemed to be somewhere between metal and bone, and wickedly sharp.

Yesterday, the Devil had shot these needles at the wall, shredding the armored alloy as though it was paper.

Sunny stared at the dead abomination, then nodded.

"Yes, that should do."

The engineer glanced at him with interest:

"Ah, the needles? How many do you want?"

Sunny shrugged.

"One should be enough."

Deciding not to bother the processing team, he summoned the Sin of Solace and listened silently to its whispers while cutting one of the needles. The engineer observed him with suriosity.

"I'm sorry, sir, but can I ask what do you need it for?"

Sunny grunted as he lifted the needle and placed it on his shoulder. Then, he glanced at the man.

"...Sorcery practice."

Chapter-989: The Fall of Falcon Scott (7)

Carrying the needle on his shoulder, Sunny chose to walk to his next destination. The thing was heavy enough that even a Master like him felt a bit of strain after a while, so he had to wrap himself in the shadows at some point.

People were giving him weird glances, but no one said anything — the Puppeteer's Shroud identified Sunny as an Awakened, and Awakened were known to do strange things on occasion. Sunny also found that mundane people often acted shy in front of him ever since he had become a Master, which pleasantly cut the number of awkward conversations he had to have.

So, he just had to be careful not to hit anyone with the unwieldy needle by accident.

As he walked, Sunny decided to check on his runes out of boredom.

Shadow Fragments: [2471/4000].

He smiled a little.

The siege of Falcon Scott might have been a terrible affair, but one thing it did not lack was enemies to kill. The rate at which he earned fragments increased a lot in the past three days. By now, the change made by each individual fragment was insignificant, but it added up.

He was now considerably stronger than he had been at the start of the Antarctica campaign, and the fifth core was not as unachievable as it had once seemed. Nephis was still far away from reaching Terror, too, which meant that he finally had a chance of catching up to her Class… at least for a short while.

'Does it even matter now? In the end, both of us will either be titans, or dead.'

Nightmare was subjugating many dreams these days, as well. All in all, Sunny was in good shape. His cohort had been forged into one of the deadliest combat units on the continent, with each member honing their skills to a truly fearsome degree. All that was left to propel him to an entirely new level of power was for Saint to emerge from her evolution.

Maybe… just maybe… they would indeed manage to hold Falcon Scott for three weeks.

Sunny made way for a column of military vehicles and looked at the crowd of refugees around him.

'Yeah… doubtful.'

With a sigh, he made a turn and approached one of the hastily erected dormitory towers. This one looked more substantial than most, but not by much. Looking up, he saw a vast expanse of glowing windows, with thousands and thousands of humans taking shelter from the cold within.

He glanced at the devil's needle, then awkwardly spun it and thrust the point deep into the ground. Taking it into the building would have been a hassle, and Sunny was sure that no one would steal it — the thing weighed more than any mundane human, or even a group of them, could carry away.

…The problem, though, was that the needle was so sharp that it continued to sink into the frozen soil under its own weight. Sunny stared at it resentfully for a moment, then repeated the process, this time thrusting it into the ground with the dull end.

Finally satisfied, he walked to the entrance to the tower, where a lone civilian was shoveling snow away. As he was passing, the man flinched and stared at him with wide eyes.

Sunny sighed inwardly.

'Am I really so scary?'

"Captain? Captain Sunless, is that you?"

Surprised, Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Uh… yes? Technically, it's Major now. Do I know…"

Before he could finish the sentence, the civilian dropped the shovel and grabbed his hand, shaking it vigorously. Sunny froze.

'What the hell is going on?'

"It is you! Master Sunless, sir… my family and I are only alive because of you. After Erebus Field, I thought… ah, sorry… but you brought us all here. Thank you. Thank you so much!"

Sunny did not know how to behave in that situation, but thankfully, the civilian finally let go of his hand and hastily opened a small bag hanging on his belt. A moment later, Sunny found himself holding a carefully packed sandwich.

"Please take this! I know it's not much… but my wife made it herself. You probably don't get a lot of home-cooked food, standing there on the wall!"

Sunny wanted to return the sandwich to the man, but then lingered. The refugees were not starving, but he knew for a fact that most of the rations they had access to were no different from what he had been accustomed to in the outskirts. Getting the ingredients to make this simple sandwich must not have been easy… it was made with love and care.

Which meant that this small, but sincere gift meant much more than it seemed.

He smiled slightly.

"Thank you. I'll enjoy it well."

The man seemed exceedingly happy to hear that and gingerly let Sunny go, picking up his shovel and returning to clearing away the snow while whistling a tune.

Walking inside the building, Sunny glanced at the sandwich and frowned a little.

He did not really know how to feel about the strange encounter. On the one hand, it was nice to see a tangible result of his efforts. After the caravan reached Falcon Scott, the refugees were quickly processed and assigned to various dormitories, so Sunny had not seen any of them again.

On the other hand, the cheerful man was clearly deluding himself if he thought that Sunny had saved him and his family. All Sunny had done was postpone their deaths by a few weeks… they would only be truly saved once carried across the strait, to Eastern Antarctica. Until then, a sharp sword still hung above their necks.

'...All the more reason to hold the damn wall for as long as we can, then.'

Suddenly thoughtful, Sunny used an elevator to descend underground and approached a particular door.

A few moments after he knocked, Beth opened it and gave him a long look.

"Oh. It's you."

He raised a hand with a wide grin.

"I brought sandwiches. Well… a sandwich."

She stepped aside to let him in and turned around.

"Professor! Your favorite Awakened is here!"

Sunny dismissed the boots of the Puppeteer's Shroud before coming inside. That small action made him feel strangely nostalgic.

'Huh… civilian life. How come I barely remember what it is?'

Chapter-990: The Fall of Falcon Scott (8)

Sunny had no particular reason for this visit, apart from simply wanting to check on how the old man had settled in. From his first impression, the dormitory apartment was too small and bare-bones for someone of Professor Obel's stature.

There were five compact bedrooms connected to a shared living room, kitchen, and bathroom, with three of the bedrooms occupied by other people. He could hear a child's voice behind one door, which meant that there might have been entire families of refugees living here. In that regard, maybe the fact that the Professor and Beth each received an entire room for themselves was already a privilege.

'Still… what the hell…'

Maybe he should not have been surprised. Professor Obel was indeed a distinguished scientist who had made great contributions to humanity, but the Antarctic Center was the administrative center of the whole Quadrant. With two hundred million people concentrated in Falcon Scott, there must have been a whole lot of distinguished people waiting for their turn to be evacuated.

Beth led him to the kitchen and put a kettle on the stove. Now that they were not busy trying to keep the caravan from falling apart, Sunny noticed that the young woman looked a bit haggard in comparison to how she had been at LO49.

There were dark circles under her eyes, a slight uncertainty to her movements, and a grim slant to her brow. Beth's temper, however, had not changed one bit.

"Tell me straight… is the wall going to hold?"

Sunny lingered for a bit, stumped by the frank question.

"How should I know? Sure, it is going to hold… until it doesn't."

Beth scoffed, pouring synthetic tea into three cheap alloy cups.

"And yet you seem to be terribly calm."

Sunny scratched the back of his head in confusion.

"Do I seem calm? Well, I guess I am. I mean, what's the worst that can happen?"

The young woman stared at him with outrage.

"Death! You can die!"

He thought about it for a few moments.

"I'd rather not die, of course. But death is definitely way better than some other things. Believe me."

Sunny had lived through several ghastly experiences himself, and still remembered a few of the harrowing nightmares he had been subjected to by his shadowy steed. It seemed that he had developed an abnormally high tolerance to pain and fear somewhere along the way, without even noticing.

Of course, his aloofness would look strange to a mundane person.

Sunny opened his mouth, thinking that he should probably try to console Beth, somehow, but at that moment, Professor Obel finally appeared — sparing them both a moment of awkwardness.

"Ah, Major Sunless! How nice of you to spare time for this old man."

The three of them settled behind a small dining table, enjoying tea. At first, Sunny was the one doing most of the speaking.

"...so, city defenses are in good condition for now. Ah, but we expect a big assault tomorrow. Make sure to remain inside, and don't go to the surface levels of the building, no matter what happens."

Beth and Professor Obel shared a glance. For some reason, the young woman seemed to be unhappy with her mentor.

"Yes, everyone received instructions on how to behave when an air attack alert is activated. Thank you for reminding us, young man."

Sunny nodded, then hesitated for a while. Eventually, he asked in a cautious tone:

"I am sorry to ask, Professor… but why are you still here? I would think that you would be put on the priority list for the evacuation."

Every civilian in the city was designated as a member of a certain group, each having a different… value.

The high-value citizens were meant to be ferried across the strait first, with all the rest placed in a long queue by a randomized algorithm. Various factors could affect one's "weight" in the algorithm, though — families with young children had a much better chance of being placed higher, for example, while people with genetic defects would be placed lower.

Citizenship level also affected the algorithm, which meant that non-citizens from the local version of the outskirts would be evacuated last.

'Figures…'

However, none of it had anything to do with Professor Obel. By all accounts, he should have been on one of the first ships out of the harbor. The giant vessels had been coursing between Falcon Scott and Eastern Antarctica for several days now, bringing many millions of people away.

Beth gave the old man a scathing glance.

"Yes, Professor. Why are you still here?"

Before he could say anything, the young woman turned to Sunny and said with indignation:

"Believe it or not, the old f… the Professor gave up his position on

the priority list, saying that he wouldn't leave without his assistant. And since I have nothing to do with the high-value group, we are both stuck in the standard selection group now. Gods only know when we'll be assigned a placement in the queue, let alone get to leave!"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Is that true, Professor?"

The old man looked down in embarrassment.

"Oh… you kids don't understand. I am an old man, you know? My bones still hurt from the long weeks spent on the road. Can't I rest a little before jumping on a ship?"

Beth scoffed, and this time, Sunny was inclined to agree.

'What kind of bullcrap reason is that?'

There was obviously something deeper going on. Hopefully, the Professor simply did not want to leave Beth behind… which was already stupid… if he was on some self-sacrificial mission, though, Sunny had to set him straight.

He opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment, the kid he had heard earlier barged into the kitchen, holding a makeshift you in her hands.

"Grandpa Obel! Grandpa Obel! It broke!"

Professor Obel gave Sunny an apologetic look, then smiled at the child and picked up the toy.

"What? It broke all by itself, huh? Well, don't worry… I'll fix it up again. Your friend is going to be as good as new in no time..."

Sunny stared at the two of them, then said in a subdued tone.

"Professor, there's a difference between being brave and being suicidal. You have to get on a ship as soon as possible. The wall is not going to hold back the enemy much longer. Not everyone will…"

The old man patted the child on the head, then simply looked at Sunny and smiled.

"All the more reason for the army to make sure that it holds for as long as possible, then."

'It's not as if we're not trying! Wait... isn't that what I said myself?'

Sunny winced, then finished his tea in one gulp and stood up.

"I guess you are right. I'll be going, then."

He glanced at Beth.

"Contact me if you need anything."

With that, Sunny left the small apartment and returned to the surface.

Picking up the devil's needle, he grunted and put it back on his shoulder.

'That old bastard… does he think that I want to be here? If I could get the hell out of Falcon Scott, like he could, I'd be relaxing in East Antarctica already!'

However…

Actually, Sunny could leave at any moment, as well. A bit of desertion was nothing, as long as it meant that he would survive.

So why was he himself staying?

'Damned Professor… as if I don't have enough headaches, already…'

Grumbling quietly, Sunny carried the heavy needle as he headed toward the distant barracks.

Chapter-991: The Fall of Falcon Scott (9)

Sunny found the Rhino without any problem, since it was parked near the military barracks. Getting the Corrupted Devil's needle through the main hatch had turned out harder than he had expected, so he ended up climbing to the APC's roof and lowering it through the upper hatch there.

Eventually, though, he found himself inside the dark, silent interior of the slumbering machine. It was a bit weird to see the Rhino so empty… but not unpleasantly so. With the whole APC to himself, Sunny felt as though he could relax and took off the mask of the confident commander that he was forced to wear in front of most people these days.

"Ah… that damned thing is so heavy!"

He dragged the needle to the armory, dropped it on the floor, and returned to the lounge area to take a quick shower. Then, feeling fresh and rejuvenated — if a bit sleepy — he summoned the Endless Spring, plopped down on a couch, and put his feet up, using the Shadow Chair as a footstool.

Sunny took a sip of cool water, then carefully unpacked the sandwich and took a bite.

The sandwich, indeed, had been made with love. It was truly tasty.

Mentally thanking the generous refugee, Sunny enjoyed his meal in peace. It was going to be his last opportunity to rest tonight, so he made sure to chew as slowly as he could.

Very soon, however, the sandwich was gone, and it was time to get to work. Sunny closed his eyes, sighed, and walked to the rear section of

the vehicle. There, a small pile of Memories lay on the holographic table of the command suite. Sunny summoned a few more, dropped them into the pile, and counted everything. A small grimace appeared on his face.

Sunny had not only been keeping watch on the wall the past few days. After reaching Falcon Scott, which had become the hub of everything in the Antarctic Center, he had been very busy spending all of his contribution points, as well.

Getting good Memories was hard, but luckily, he was once again going for quantity over quality.

Additionally, Sunny had no reason to stick to the official channels — receiving anything through the army requisition system was a tough and slow process, especially with the network being down most of the time, so he just traded his points directly to the Awakened soldiers for the Memories that were useless to them.

He had even hired a few Sleepers from the caravan to be his errand boys, which made the whole process faster.

'...Not fast enough, though.'

Shaking his head, Sunny left the pile of Memories alone, cleared some space on the table, and summoned two weapons. One of them was his old and loyal tachi, the Midnight Shard, and the other was Morgan's Warbow.

Sunny concentrated for a moment, allowing his gaze to peer through the surface of the two Memories. The intricate tapestry of ethereal strings hidden inside them was vast and mind-numbingly complicated. He could already feel a hint of a headache coming on.

Sunny was trying to do something that he had never done before… a few things, actually.

Firstly, he wanted to recreate an Ascended enchantment, which were much, much more expansive and complex than the Awakened and Dormant ones he had mostly copied before.

Secondly, he wanted to disassemble the structure of a particular

enchantment into its basic elements, then heavily modify one of those elements and turn it into an independent enchantment of its own.

And lastly, he wanted to create a functional Memory from scratch. That he had done on many occasions before, but only in the most rudimentary form.

The first two steps were already hard enough, but it was the last one that had turned unexpectedly troublesome. As Sunny had found out, not all materials had the capacity to sustain powerful enchantments. They would simply disintegrate under strain, or be torn apart by the raging essence.

He needed refined material to create a powerful Memory… hence the needle of a Corrupted Devil. Since Sunny was planning to use Transcendent soul shards, nothing less would do.

Actually, he wasn't really sure if the needle was good enough for his purposes, either. But it was his best bet.

Sunny studied the weave of ethereal strings, and at the same time wove essence threads of his own — he was going to need a lot of them, so there was no time to waste.

Minute passed after minute, merging into hours. Sunny continued sitting motionlessly in front of the two Memories, with only the fingers of his four hands moving in the air.

Eventually, his deep concentration was broken by the sound of an incoming call. Sunny lingered for a few moments, then slowly shifted his gaze to the communicator.

As soon as he pressed on it, Master Jet's face appeared on the screen. She was chewing on a piece of roasted monster meat, seemingly very hungry or in a hurry to finish her meal.

"Hey. How… ah… is your side project going?"

Sunny stared at her incredulously.

"It's going. It would go better if I was not distracted by unexpected calls in the middle of the night, though… well, anyway. Did you

manage to get what I asked for?"

Jet swallowed the last piece of the roasted meat, wiped the juice off her lips, and smiled.

"Yeah. I gathered all the Memories that the members of my cohort have no use for. Anyway, why do you need them? That's a crazy amount of contribution points to waste on a bunch of Tier One trinkets."

Sunny smiled from the corner of his mouth.

"I am thinking of giving them to a beautiful lady."

A spark of curiosity glinted in Jet's eyes.

"Oh… better be quick with it, then. If she really is a lady, reaching her bedroom might be a slow affair. And we all might be dead very soon…"

Sunny blinked.

"What? No, that was not what I…"

Soul Reaper laughed.

"Gods, Sunny, relax. In any case, are you prepared for tomorrow?"

Sunny glowered at her for a couple of moments, then scoffed.

"Yeah, sure. As prepared as I can be."

Jet drank some water from her flask, then closed it and smiled again.

This time, her smile looked very ominous.

"Well, good. Because tomorrow came a little early. Go get your cohort, Major Sunless."

…In the next moment, loud sirens of the aerial attack alarm howled eerily throughout the city, echoing through the crowded streets.

Chapter-992: The Fall of Falcon Scott (10)

'Damnation!'

Sunny scrambled to his feet, hastily dismissing the Midnight Shard and grabbing his bow. On the screen of the communicator, Jet's face disappeared, replaced by an incoming message that named the section of the wall he and his cohort were supposed to go to.

'South…'

This time, they were meant to fight right above the main gates of the city, on the part of the defensive barrier that faced inland — and where the battle was going to be the fiercest. It seemed that Army Command was finally done holding the Irregulars in reserve.

Sunny glanced at the clock. It was just past the earliest time the members of his cohort could return from the Dream Realm, if they had chosen to sleep tonight.

'That's good.'

He dashed to the pilot's cabin of the Rhino and ran the vehicle through the startup procedure. The APC sluggishly came to life, making many sounds that were probably not a good sign.

As Sunny waited, he mentally went over each member of his cohort, thinking about what task he would assign them and whether their Flaws would be detrimental in this particular battle. The chances of that were low, but he still needed to check.

No one with an especially crippling Flaw would have made it through years of service, and soldiers were not required to disclose them — sharing something that personal and potentially dangerous could only

be done voluntarily. There was nothing about the Flaws in the dossiers Sunny had read, but after spending months fighting side by side with his people, he deduced most of them.

The Flaws of the Irregulars were indeed not too dire, and most of his people were mature Awakened who had had at least a decade to learn how to deal with them. Quentin, for example, seemed to be unable to break a promise. Kim was naturally unassuming. Samara had a slow rate of soul essence regeneration. Belle had to work especially hard on his impulse control.

Luster… well, that one was pretty apparent.

Dorn's Flaw was the cruelest, but it would only become detrimental years from now. His body was slowly, but constantly growing… and would most likely collapse under its own weight one day, some time in the future.

Nothing that would play a role in today's battle, though.

'All good.'

At that moment, the hatch of the Rhino opened, making the eerie wailing of the sirens much louder. The members of his cohort rushed in, summoning their armor and weapons as they did.

"Captain! Everyone's here!"

Without waiting for Luster to get to the cabin, Sunny lowered himself into the driver's seat and sent the Rhino forward. His driving skills were not really top-notch… or any good, really… but he could get the APC to the wall, at least.

"Get yourselves ready. You all remember the plan, correct?"

Since Winter was going to take center stage in the battle against the Devouring Cloud, the Irregulars had come up with a few strategies in advance.

"Yes, sir!"

Sunny nodded.

"Well, then, go rub Luster's lucky charm. Gods know we're going to need some luck today."

Hearing the laughter of his comrades, Luster crossed his arms.

"Hey! That thing really works!"

"Four out of the five most deadly Nightmare Creatures in the region… you call that luck?"

"Exactly! And I survived meeting every one!"

Chuckling, Sunny concentrated on controlling the massive APC.

The Rhino sped through the streets of Falcon Scott. Thankfully, they were mostly empty by now — the air raid sirens had sent the refugees scrambling to get inside. He could see a lot of frightened people still hurrying to reach their assigned dormitories, but mostly, there were only military transports in sight.

Briefly, Sunny wondered about the man who had gifted him a sandwich. Hopefully, his family had a room below ground… if not, surviving the Devouring Cloud might not be easy for them.

'Concentrate.'

Finally, the Rhino reached the staging area under the wall. Not bothering to park it properly, Sunny picked up Morgan's Warbow and headed for the exit hatch. His soldiers followed.

The army camp was in a state of perpetual, organized chaos — more so today than it had been before. A tense, anxious mood hung in the air. Everyone had a grim expression on their faces, sometimes glancing south with fear hiding in their eyes. Sunny thought that he could already hear the distant, low hum of the approaching swarm.

"Look alive!"

His shout seemed to energize the soldiers. Glancing at him with hints of recognition and reverence, they parted, letting the Devils march through. Sunny made sure to put on the most calm and arrogant expression he could manage, as if the vast swarm of flying

abominations was nothing more than a little annoyance.

His performance seemed to have worked, since some of the tension dissipated.

Even the members of his own cohort seemed to relax a little.

'What… why the hell are you relaxing, idiots?! You of all people should know how damn terrifying the Devouring Cloud is! I mean, even I am scared!'

…But he wasn't, not really. Mostly because the brood monsters had no means of attacking incorporeal targets, so his personal safety was not at risk. And because the Devouring Cloud was the least dangerous of the enemies converging on Falcon Scott.

It was still supremely dangerous, however.

The Irregulars entered an open elevator that took them to the top of the wall. Falcon Scott looked strangely empty from the moving platform, its usual liveliness gone. It seemed as if the whole city was holding its breath, hoping that the predator would not notice the prey.

'Zero chance of that happening...'

Stepping onto the wall, Sunny looked around and noticed a few familiar figures some distance away.

A minute later, he was standing side by side with Jet, Winter, and Dale, looking south over the battlements. The four of them remained silent for a while, until Soul Reaper finally spoke, her voice measured:

"Wow. That is… a lot of abominations."

Below them, in the distance, the ground was slowly disappearing behind an immense wall of swirling haze. It looked as if the world itself was being devoured, erased from existence by the approaching cloud.

...Suddenly, Sunny caught himself missing the calm darkness of the

underground tunnel.

Chapter-993: The Fall of Falcon Scott (11)

The Devouring Cloud posed an existential threat to Falcon Scott, but strangely, Sunny was not too worried, at least for himself. Perhaps it was the Marble Shell that gave him confidence, or perhaps it was the presence of the other Ascended Irregulars. The four of them were a fearsome force by themselves, and there were thousands of other Awakened defending the city, to boot.

Not to mention countless mundane soldiers, impregnable fortifications, and two entire Saints.

Sky Tide had been away, fighting the Winter Beast somewhere in the wilderness. It was unknown whether she would be able to return in time to participate in today's battle, but Bloodwave was here, protecting the anchored ships. If things went south, he would undoubtedly interfere.

Master Jet studied the approaching brood swarm, her icy blue eyes cold and calculating. Then, she sighed.

"Something is different."

Sunny glanced at her with a silent question, prompting Soul Reaper to shake her head.

"The Devouring Cloud is behaving differently from how the reports described it."

He frowned, then glanced at the distant haze.

…Indeed, the swarm was acting a bit differently from how it had been before. It seemed slightly less erratic, slightly more driven. The speed with which the Devouring World consumed distance was

greater than Sunny had expected.

Summoning his helmet, Dale shrugged.

"They probably sense the two hundred million souls behind us. Who wouldn't hurry to get to a feast?"

Winter smiled.

"Well, then… let's show them some hospitality."

She remained motionless for a few moments, then raised her hands and cautiously removed her sunglasses. A deep sigh escaped from her lips.

That was the first time Sunny saw Winter's eyes. They were entirely black, with pupils that resembled two drops of coagulated blood. Looking into them made him deeply, irrationally uncomfortable.

"Begin."

Several Awakened — three from Soul Reaper's cohort and one from Dale's - stepped forward. Following Sunny's nod, Luster did the same.

In this battle, Winter was going to be the tip of their spear. Her Aspect would play a key role, and so, it had to be augmented as much as possible.

Several Memories started to manifest in the air around the Ascended archer — a beautiful handheld mirror, a small skull with a precious jewel embedded into its forehead, a silver coin with the image of a beautiful woman on one side and that of a hideous monster on the other — and at the same time, the four Awakened activated their own Abilities.

One started to draw a complicated circle around Winter, saturating it with essence as he went. Another concentrated on the Memories, somehow channeling more power into them… Luster simply placed his hand on her shoulder, and then sent Sunny a strangely pleased glance.

'That fool…'

Sunny rolled his eyes and walked a few steps away. He wrapped one shadow around his body and the other three around Morgan's Warbow, then evaluated how much essence he had left.

It was not as much as he would have wanted, but enough to summon the Strike of Thunder many times, as well as manifest countless [Soul Arrows] in between the shots. He would be able to activate the Dying Wish, as well, if the abominations managed to get close to the wall.

Today, Sunny had a personal goal — to slaughter as many of the brood beasts as possible. Hundreds of them, or maybe even a thousand. With almost all the vile creatures being Awakened, he would not be getting many fragments, but that was alright. What he wanted were Memories, anyway — the more, the better, no matter how weak.

"What do you think, Sunny? Are we going to win today?"

He glanced at Master Jet, who was calmly spinning a simple shuriken in her hand. The aura of illusory cold radiating from her seemed especially chilling right now.

He shrugged.

"Sure. Why not? It's just a bunch of ugly flying leeches."

Soul Reaper grinned and did not say anything else.

A few minutes later, the Devouring Cloud entered the firing range of the rail guns. Once again, the thunderous sound of heaving tungsten rounds shattering the sound barrier made the whole wall vibrate. Even though Sunny knew that the bombardment had to have killed countless creatures, it seemed as though the distant haze simply swallowed them.

There was not even the smallest ripple or rift in the uninterrupted veil of flying horrors.

'...Crap.'

Then, the turrets and the MWPs joined the barrage and unleashed a hail of bullets. Numerous tracer rounds flew from the wall into the

rolling cloud of brood beasts. It was strangely beautiful — as though a shining rain was falling from the ground into the sky, struggling to pierce the black veil of extinguishing darkness.

As if utterly untouched by the devastating onslaught, the Devouring Cloud continued forward without ever slowing down. By now, the hum of countless leathery wings had grown loud enough to seep through the clamor of the firing guns, spreading through the air like the murmur of a vast sea.

The creatures were already close enough for the illusion of a hazy veil to fall apart into the harrowing visage of myriads of black dots swarming in the air. Sunny grimaced, then drew his bow and sent the Strike of Thunder into the approaching horde.

Before the furious bolt of lightning reached it, he was already pulling on the string again, an arrow of pale gold appearing on it.

A flash of stark, eclectic light illuminated a tiny portion of the swarm, followed by the whispers of the Spell.

'Crap!'

At that point, the Devouring Cloud was supposed to slow down. It had just reached the edge of the vast killing field between the city wall and the mountains, coming into view of numerous piles of Nightmare Creature carcasses covering the ground. The brood beasts were supposed to turn their attention to that plentiful source of food before continuing toward Falcon Scott in full force.

However, they did not.

Acting in contradiction to all the analytical reports by Army Command, the swarm ignored the feast of rotting flesh completely, and instead accelerated forward even more.

…That was when Winter finally made her move.

Taking a deep breath, she raised her bow and summoned a single, fiery arrow. Her black eyes seemed to become even darker still, and the crimson blood drops of her pupils shone with an eerie, ominous glow.

The string of the bow rang, and the flaming arrow flashed through the darkness, leaving a blazing trail behind.

When it hit, the darkness of the polar night was suddenly no more.

Chapter-994: The Fall of Falcon Scott (12)

The moment Winter's arrow reached the Devouring Cloud, a brilliant flash of light blinded everyone for a moment. A vast sphere of flame bloomed in the middle of the swarm, spreading far and wide like a rolling wave of destruction. Then, it collapsed on itself and exploded once more.

Tongues of flame spread through the mass of abominations, swallowing countless brood beasts. Some were turned to ash, some fell down to the ground like burning stars. Others continued to burn as they streaked chaotically through the sky, their flesh boiling and dissipating.

But they did not die before colliding with some of their vile brethren.

The fire spread.

As if possessing a mind of its own, it continued to spread from one abomination to another, until it seemed as though the sky itself was aflame. The darkness was chased out by the furious orange-white glow, and Sunny felt something that he had never expected to feel in the middle of winter in Antarctica.

Scorching heat caressing his skin.

He sucked in a shaky breath.

'...Damn.'

It seemed that all their preparations were not in vain. Winter's opening was nothing short of breathtaking. It was outright frightening, if he was honest.

But it was just an opening, nevertheless— although the Devouring Cloud had sustained considerable losses and had to slow down, it was in no way stopped. Already, some brood beasts were charging through the wall of fire, lunging toward the city.

Grinning at the sight of the fiery slaughter, Sunny shook off his momentary shock and drew Morgan's Warbow again.

'More, more… I need to kill more…'

Another bolt of lightning slammed into the swarm, reaping a multitude of lives. An arrow of pale gold pierced a brood beast clean through, then continued to fly forward, killing several others. There were so many abominations that Sunny did not even have to aim.

The four cohorts of Irregulars, as well as all the rest of the Awakened defenders, poured all their strength into destroying the descending tide of winged horrors. Even though it seemed as if the sky itself was falling on them, vast swathes of it enveloped in flame, no one's courage broke.

It was natural to fear for one's life, but with two hundred million people depending on their protection, the soldiers of the First Army stubbornly clung to their positions despite the terror of the approaching swarm.

By his side, Soul Reaper waved her hands, dozens of throwing stars appearing between her fingers and shooting forward with terrible speed, shredding a whole swathe of the swarm like a steel rain.

A few steps away, Samara was methodically discharging her rifle, explosions of essence blossoming in the mass of Nightmare Creatures. Pieces of torn flesh and streams of blood rained down without stop.

The rest of the Devils were doing their part.

...Winter was not at all done with her part of the slaughter, either.

One after another, enchanted arrows flew from the string of her bow. With four Awakened elites using their Aspects to augment hers and a number of powerful Memories feeding her their power, the Ascended archer became a source of shocking devastation.

Sunny finally understood why Winter was sometimes called a walking artillery unit. There were a lot of arrows in her arsenal capable of widespread destruction, and augmented as she was, the scope of that destruction only grew. Thanks to her Aspect, the arrows never missed.

…And with Luster continuously feeding her soul essence, she had no reason to stop.

The Devouring Cloud was melting in front of his eyes.

'More!'

Sunny strained his muscles to draw the string, the process of dismissing and summoning the Strike of Thunder back finally finished... just in time. A fierce bolt of lightning pierced the air once again.

[You have slain…]

[You have slain...]

[You have slain...]

[You have received…]

And yet, even with all that destruction summoned upon the brood swarm, it was still advancing on the city. Half of the vast killing field had already disappeared in its shadow, and the first of the winged horrors were already reaching the wall.

Somewhere to his left, a massive MWP stumbled, the appalling shape of a brood beast disappearing into the breach in the war platform's armor that it had just created with the circular, fleshy maw. The creature crawled into the pilot's cabin — in the next moment, the massive machine jerked erratically and stepped back, plummeting from the battlement into the darkness.

Sunny uttered a silent curse.

At the same time, Dale stepped closer to Winter. A spherical dome of transparent energy enveloped the two of them, as well as all the

Awakened standing nearby. Their arrows and bullets easily passed through the dome to hit the enemies, but when a lone brood beast lunged at Winter from above, it collided against the wall of shimmering energy as if against solid stone.

The creature's body bounced away in a rain of blood.

'I guess it's time for…'

"Sunny! Now!"

Jet's voice confirmed his own thoughts. They briefly glanced at each other, then dashed away from the Irregulars. Sunny dismissed his bow, took a deep breath, and summoned the Sin of Solace instead.

Instantly, an insidious voice — his own voice — spoke into his ear:

"Huh. Are you still pretending that you can actually save anyone? You know…"

'Shut the hell up! No one asked!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny followed Soul Reaper until they reached a relatively empty section of the wall a couple of hundred meters away from the position of the Irregulars. She shouted at the nearby soldiers, commanding them to retreat.

Then, Jet turned to Sunny and flashed him a wicked smile.

"Are you ready?"

He nodded.

"Then activate that charm of yours!"

Sunny sighed, then poured essence into the Dying Wish. At the same time, he wrapped all four shadows around his body and activated the [Underworld Armament] trait of the Marble Shell, enhancing the effect of the charm.

His goals here were rather simple… he needed to give Winter as much time as possible to eradicate the swarm, and at the same time,

prevent brood beasts from flying into the city.

What better way was there to achieve both than to present the Devouring Cloud with an irresistibly tasty target?

The plan was bound to work…

Its only downside was that, for a while, Sunny would have to survive the attention of the entire swarm.

Somehow.

Chapter-995: The Fall of Falcon Scott (13)

The world seemed trapped in a violent seizure. The darkness of the endless night was savaged, torn apart by the spreading wildfire and the disorienting flashes of numerous firing armaments. The cacophony of thunderous salvos and inhuman shrieks fused into an almost palpable force, pressing down on Sunny from all sides.

Some distance away, above the burning hellscape of the killing field, the Devouring Cloud had reformed itself to create a breach in the wall of flames. A dark mass of brood beasts poured forward, rushing to reach the defensive barrier of the last human city. The incoming segment of the swarm swirled, forming into a long and vast protuberance.

It looked like a giant tentacle that grew and twisted, aiming for a single spot on the city wall… the dome of shimmering energy where Dale and Winter were making their stand.

'Something is indeed very wrong…'

Since when was the Devouring Cloud so purposeful? How could the swarm of mindless brood beasts not only identify the deadliest threat, but also show enough coordinated intent to try taking it out first?

Feeling a chill run down his spine, Sunny activated the [Dying Wish] and watched as the tip of the dark protuberance pivoted, changing its direction to attack him instead.

'Wonderful.'

He glanced at Jet, lingered for a moment, and then asked in a hoarse voice:

"Are we sure that we want to do this?"

Soul Reaper lowered her graceful glaive, a thin layer of ice slowly condensing on its silver blade. Brushing her raven black hair back, she smiled from the corner of her mouth.

"What do our wishes have to do with anything?"

Sunny looked back at the approaching swarm and sighed.

"...Fair enough."

At that point, most of the armaments on the southern section of the wall had concentrated their fire on the advancing protuberance. It was being torn by the heavy tungsten rounds of the rail guns, the squall of bullets unleashed by countless turrets, the sporadic rifle fire of mundane infantrymen, the Memories and Abilities of Awakened soldiers.

As Sunny watched, swarms of miniature missiles shot from the shoulders of the towering MWPs, streaking across the sky and blasting countless abominations to shreds.

The attacking swarm was continuously breaking and rebuilding itself, new brood beasts instantly taking the place of the slain ones to close the gaps… it was not showing any signs of slowing down, though, which meant that Sunny would not escape it.

Well… he was not worried.

"Sure you are."

Sunny winced and glanced at the Sin of Solace with displeasure. His mental defenses were supposed to be quite high right now. Why wasn't the damned sword affected at all?

"Ah, yes. Your new, shiny shell… as good a reason to feel confident as any, I guess. And if that is not enough, you can always escape into the shadows. Right?"

Sunny pretended not to hear the insidious voice.

"Have you not stopped to think about Jet, though? Where would she escape? Are you ready to watch her die? You better be… an outsider like her does not matter, anyway…"

Sunny glanced at Master Jet, who was observing the swarm by his side. Her beautiful face was calm and focused.

He sighed.

'You are very proud of yourself, aren't you? Toying with me, playing on my deepest fears and insecurities… but aren't you embarrassed of yourself a little?'

The Sin of Solace did not answer.

'I'll admit, you did catch me by surprise a couple of times. However, now that I know what to expect, why would such childish jabs have any effect on me? I don't know whether you really are the voice of the cursed sword, or simply a part of my own subconscious twisted by it… although the latter seems more probable. However, one thing I do know is that you are out of your league here, buddy.'

He shook the beautiful jian slightly.

'I mean, who do you think you are? You are not the voice of Ariel, the Demon of Dread. You are merely a memory… of an echo… of a whisper. Something that pathetic wants to drive me crazy? Please, don't make me laugh.'

There were a few moments of silence, and then, the insidious voice answered mockingly:

"And yet, here you are, talking to an imaginary voice in the middle of a battle."

Sunny smiled.

'So what? Hearing voices and talking to myself is somewhat of a hobby of mine.'

Been there, done that.

He pushed the annoying whispers to the back of his mind and concentrated on what was about to come.

A small shadow suddenly fell from the sky. Sunny almost moved to attack it, but then held himself back. In the next moment, a familiar crow landed on Jet's shoulder, glanced at him arrogantly, and turned to its master.

"Swam! Swam!"

Jet patted the bird on the head with a small smile.

"Yes. I know. Now go, it is going to be too dangerous for you."

The crow let out an outraged caw and spread its wings to make itself look bigger, but to no avail — she had already dismissed the Echo, making it dissipate into a swirl of sparks.

A few seconds later, the swarm was upon them.

The first of the lunging brood beast was cleanly severed in half by Jet's glaive, two bleeding slabs of hideous flesh flying over the wall to fall into the siege camp below. But the next one was already attacking.

Sunny allowed his mind to switch into the state of battle clarity — or rather, dive deeper into it, since clarity had long become like second nature to him. His thoughts accelerated, and his perception of the world became sharper, clearer, and more encompassing.

He moved forward with light steps, the Sin of Solace flashing through the air to pierce the creature's body. Its flesh parted before the jade blade like water.

At the same time, the shadows around them stirred, and a dozen black tentacles rose from them, grabbing the attacking brood beasts and tearing them apart.

The tentacles were different and much more complex than the ones he had usually summoned before — these ones had joints and a semblance of structure, ending with crude, but nimble and powerful hands. Sunny's long hours of practice had not been in vain. He had

pushed his grasp of Shadow Manifestation forward by a lot.

…Of course, using it burned through his essence. Everything Sunny did required him to spend essence — weaving shadow strings, repeatedly summoning the Strike of Thunder, sustaining and augmenting the effect of the Dying Wish, saturating his body with resilience and strength. Any other Master would have been drained of all energy already.

But Sunny's reserves of essence were vast and potent, more than four times the volume of almost anyone else of the same Rank. At the same time, his control of it was nothing short of exquisite, allowing for near-perfect efficiency.

He had a lot of fight left in him, still.

The question was whether that would be enough.

Chapter-996: The Fall of Falcon Scott (14)

The swarm of brood beasts descended upon Sunny and Master Jet. The two of them moved with speed that would have seemed utterly inhuman to mundane soldiers, if any of them had remained nearby… curiously enough, a Master would have been stunned just as much.

Both Ascended Irregulars were showing a level of physical prowess that only those with extremely powerful combat Aspects were supposed to possess.

Soul Reaper's glaive turned into a blur as she spun it, dissecting scores of the ghastly abominations. The beautiful jade jian danced like a feather, harvesting life after life.

Of course, neither Sunny nor Jet remained static, moving across the wide expanse of the battlement like a hurricane of cutting steel. They danced between the attacking Nightmare Creatures, never remaining in one spot long enough to be buried under their onslaught.

Well… Sunny danced. His battle style was graceful and fluid, to the point where it seemed as though he had no rigid shape at all. Master Jet, on the other hand, fought with the dire and straightforward inevitability of an experienced butcher, slaughtering her enemies both methodically and ruthlessly.

…There was an awful beauty to her mesmerizing savagery, as well.

"Get ready!"

Sunny did not need the warning. The whirlwind of abominations surrounding them was already bad enough, but it was also just the beginning — most of the protuberance of the Devouring Cloud had yet to reach them, and the situation was about to become many times

worse.

'Oh, oh… why did I come to this damned continent?'

Full of self-pity, he pivoted to the right, narrowly avoided a diving brood beast, and brandished the Sin of Solace to cut down another one. At the same time, he glanced over the edge of the wall, where a long stretch of the world was obscured by the swarm of abominations.

By now, the two of them were surrounded from all sides, but most of the enemies were still coming from a single direction. The good news was that the Dying Wish was working, preventing the brood beasts from passing the wall and escaping into the city.

The bad news was that he could not see the glow of Winter's flames at all now, which meant that the part of the swarm attacking them was a second at most from growing much harder to deal with. There had to be really, really many of them to obscure the wildfire entirely.

Sunny called upon the shadows, and a black wall suddenly rose between the battlement and the main body of the protuberance. Countless brood beasts slammed into it in the next moment, impaling themselves on the sharp spikes that shot from the black surface. Even more had to twist in the air to avoid the obstacle.

That did not slow the swarm much, but it did funnel it somewhat, giving Sunny and Jet some room to breathe.

At least for a moment.

Then, things got really tense.

"Argh, dammit!"

There were too many brood beasts lunging at him to kill and evade them all. Sunny did his best, but it was still not enough. Even with the help of shadow hands, he was forced to receive several attacks head-on.

Making his body as heavy as a slab of rock, Sunny gritted his teeth and stood his ground. A disgusting leathery body slammed into him

— if he had not used the Feather of Truth to change his mass, the impact would have thrown Sunny to the ground, or even worse, off the wall.

As it was, he only took half a step back, while the brood beast bounced back with the nauseating crunch of breaking bones.

'Ah, that hurt…'

Before Sunny could do anything, another creature tore into his forearm. The leather vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud held some of the horrid fangs back, but not all of them…

However, the creature's fangs scraped fruitlessly against Sunny's skin, not leaving even a scratch on it.

He grinned.

'Chew on this, bastard.'

With that, Sunny spun the Sin of Solace into reverse grip and easily cut through the abomination's long neck. Usually, it would have been hard to deal any damage from such an awkward position, but the jade blade of the cursed sword was so sharp that he did not have to put any effort into the cut at all.

The brood beast's body convulsed and fell down. Its severed maw, however, was still stubbornly trying to gnaw on Sunny's flesh.

'Whatever…'

Ignoring the vice-like and unpleasantly moist grasp of the creature's jaw, he threw himself back into the battle. A few moments later, it flew off his forearm, pulled away by powerful inertia.

Sadly, that was not the last abomination that managed to hit him. As their number grew and grew, Sunny started to miss more attacks. Most of them failed to penetrate the adamantine barrier of the Marble Shell, but a few did not — there were now shallow scratches here and there on his body, and their number was swiftly increasing.

Master Jet was in a similar position, although she did not seem to be

bothered by it at all. Even though her black leather armor was torn and shredded, revealing glimpses of alabaster skin and trickles of crimson blood, she fought with the same unrestrained, magnificent brutality. There was even a dark, wicked grin on her face.

'What is wrong with that woman?'

He wasted a moment to shift his sight and glance at her core, only to see that it was brimming with essence, full to the limit. That cost him another scratch, as well as a pang of envy.

'Damn it, Master Jet's Aspect is simply cheating…'

To be fair, his Aspect was somewhat of a cheat as well. More than that, both of them were fighting in nearly optimal conditions — Soul Reaper was well suited to fight against large numbers of weaker enemies, who could provide her with a nearly endless supply of essence, while Sunny was a true menace when surrounded by shadows.

Throughout the cruel length of the polar night, the whole world was enveloped by shadows, and he was their Master.

And yet…

Both of them were in dire danger.

Even if individual brood beasts did not pose much of a threat to the two Ascended, thousands and thousands of them did. An army of ants was more than capable of killing an elephant.

Whatever an elephant was.

Grinding his teeth, Sunny danced between the countless abominations and felt his own essence disappear with frightening speed.

'Winter better be very busy obliterating the main body of the swarm… fast!'

Chapter-997: The Fall of Falcon Scott (15)

Black pillars of smoke rose into the sky, obscuring the stars like a smoldering veil. Between the roiling dark heaven and the cold ravaged land, a fiery inferno seethed and swarmed, drowning the world in a scorching orange glow. Surrounded by numerous abominations and the cacophonous roar of heavy armaments, Sunny and Jet fought against the Devouring Cloud.

The wind was picking up.

Struggling not to slip on the fetid blood that covered the alloy expanse of the battlement, Sunny pulled Soul Reaper close and bent down, summoning a dome of shadows to surround them. His breathing was hoarse and labored.

There was no light inside the improvised shelter, and the brood beasts were already attacking it, the whole structure trembling under an onslaught of heavy blows. Worse still, he did not dare to sustain the barrier for more than a few seconds, afraid that the swarm would lose interest and shift its attention to the city beyond.

"I won't last much longer."

Master Jet was uncomfortably close, her physical state as battered and bloodied as his. Her chest rose and fell erratically, betraying the same level of exhaustion. Nevertheless, her voice sounded calm:

"You can't fight anymore?"

He shook his head, then spoke after realizing that she probably could not see him.

"No, not that. The charm… I don't have enough essence left to keep it

active for long."

She lingered for a moment.

"Do what you can. After that, let's see what fate has in store."

Sunny winced at her choice of words, then considered if it was time to summon Nightmare. The black steed would be helpful in surviving the tide of brood beasts, but the two of them were not at the point of needing to be rescued yet. It was supplying the Dying Wish with essence that was the problem.

Nightmare was also large and lacked armor. His main defense was speed and viciousness, which would not protect him against the swarm. If the shadow stallion sustained heavy wounds today, Sunny would not be able to call upon him tomorrow.

'Back to the slaughter, then.'

He glanced at Jet.

"Ready?"

She smiled in the darkness.

"Always."

He allowed the suffering shadows to lose substance, and the black dome fell apart around them.

Immediately, a flood of brood beasts descended upon the two Ascended. Sunny and Jet were pushed back to back, unable to move. The jade longsword and the silver glaive blurred, tearing through the ghastly abominations. The smell of blood permeated the air.

It was somewhat of a heroic scene, exactly like what he had often seen in dramas and webtoons about valiant Awakened… not very practical, though. Stuck in one spot and limited in where he could move, Sunny became a perfect target.

'Curse it!'

A strong gale of wind slammed into them, throwing many brood beasts off course. Jet used that moment to lunge forward and brandish her glaive, causing an explosion of frost to spread through the swarm, and clear a bit of space around them.

High above, the veil of smoke looked like storm clouds.

Sunny was still feeding his essence into the Dying Wish and sustaining the augmentation of the [Underworld Armament], hoping to buy Winter another minute… maybe half a minute… of time.

But the Devouring Cloud seemed to have suddenly learned how to resist Solvane's charm.

Without any provocation, the mass of brood beasts shifted, flashing past the two bloodied Masters. Ignoring the alluring enchantment of the Dying Wish, they lunged in the direction where Dale's protective barrier still shimmered with mystical energy.

'What the hell!'

Sunny slashed at the nearest abomination, cutting it in half. The other brood beasts simply ignored him and flew away.

[You have slain an Awakened Beast, Brood of the Devouring Cloud.]

[You have received…]

He ignored the quiet whisper of the Spell and stared at the apocalyptic scene of the battlefield.

The killing field below the wall was enveloped in flame. The sky was burning with red embers, as well. The main body of the swarm seemed… diminished, somewhat. Where once there had been an uninterrupted wall of winged horrors, now there was a tattered curtain of them, with vast breaches and gaps in its vile, seething mass.

Winter and all the other defenders did not waste the time he had bought them.

The problem, however, was that the flames unleashed by the

Ascended archer in her initial attack had almost died down, and now, the whole of the Devouring Cloud was advancing on the city.

This was a key moment. Winter had to break their advance once and for all… and for that to happen, nothing could interrupt her.

'Goddammit…'

Sunny prepared himself, ready to dash toward the position of the rest of the Irregulars.

He could see a dark tentacle of the thinned protuberance slamming into Dale's barrier, the wind howling so loudly that it drowned out the thunder of the firing rail guns for a moment. The barrier grew dimmer, but held… for now.

A radiant arrow escaped from it, streaking across the killing field and disappearing into the Devouring Cloud. Then, it was as though a large portion of the swarm imploded in on itself, countless abominations being violently pulled and crushed by an invisible force.

However, it was still not enough. Dale's barrier was growing dimmer and dimmer, and the swarm was still advancing, a dozen seconds away from crashing into the defenders of the city.

'Not enough...'

…And then, a vast shadow fell from the sky, tearing through the veil of smoke and storm clouds obscuring it. At the same time, a devastating net of lightning enveloped the Devouring Cloud, turning the world white for a second. Thousands of abominations were instantly burned to ash.

A giant bird of prey with white feathers and devastating talons of lustrous steel dove into the swarm. Her enormous wings were wreathed in thunderclouds, and bolts of lightning danced around her body like a cloak. A hurricane of wind summoned by her arrival threw the center of the Devouring Cloud into disarray.

Sunny froze.

"Sky Tide!"

Saint Tyris looked battered and exhausted, but still incredibly fearsome. Her white feathers were painted by blood, and there was a thin layer of ice covering many parts of her body. Despite all that, she cut through the swarm like a blade of a guillotine, and at the same time, powerful winds pressed the abominations down and pushed them away from the city.

Sunny stared at the incredible scene in tired silence. He had never been that happy to see a Saint before.

Lowering the Sin of Solace, he looked at Master Jet. A somewhat confused question escaped from his lips:

"...Have we won?"

She lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

"It seems that w…"

Before Soul Reaper could finish the sentence, however, the city wall suddenly quaked under them.

Chapter-998: The Fall of Falcon Scott (16)

The wall trembled violently, almost throwing Sunny off his feet. He caught himself from falling and spun, the Sin of Solace flying into a defensive stance.

"What the hell was that?!"

Master Jet used her glaive to keep herself upright and looked around. For the first time since the start of the battle, her expression became grim.

She did not answer for a couple of seconds. Then, her icy eyes widened slightly. Soul Reaper turned to Sunny, trying to say something, but he had already sensed it himself.

A cold shiver ran down his spine.

"The Call…"

The Call of the Nightmare had suddenly grown much louder, assaulting his mind with an onslaught of screaming whispers.

In the next moment... the world came undone, and the piercing sound of tearing alloy filled Sunny's ears. The battlement beneath him was falling apart, and a strong aftershock of whatever it was that had destroyed it rolled through the air, throwing him away.

'No!'

Sunny did not see it yet, but he already understood what had happened.

A Nightmare Gate had just opened right below where he and Jet had

fought, annihilating a large section of the wall.

An ugly rift in reality tore through the armored alloy, turning it into nothing. The vertical schism of pure nothingness played strange tricks with both light and darkness, making it appear simultaneously perfectly flat and inconceivably deep. A litany of inaudible screams thundered out of it in deafening silence, washing over the world like a demented call.

The wall was breached from top to bottom — some of it devoured by the Gate, the rest simply collapsing when the supporting structure suddenly disappeared.

Sunny plummeted down in a rain of debris.

Before he could truly comprehend what was happening, his body brushed against the boundary of the Gate. Instantly, an explosion of blinding pain enveloped his body and soul, and a strange repelling force pushed him away.

A Nightmare Gate was a one-way path — creatures of the Dream Realm could enter through it into the waking world, but nothing from the waking world could pass through it into the land of nightmares. Only Awakened could answer its Call by sending their souls on a perilous journey. All they had to do was fall asleep in the vicinity of the rift.

Masters and Saint could answer it, too, by pulling on their own anchors — but not by physically stepping through the Gate. Maybe Sovereigns were different, but Sunny had no time to think about it.

Or could think about it, really. For a few moments after experiencing the shock of brushing against the lightless rift, his mind became utterly blank.

And when he came to his senses, he found himself falling from a seventy-meter height, the ground approaching him with frightening speed.

Still disoriented, Sunny scrambled to summon the Dark Wing, but then froze for a split second.

There was not enough time for the translucent Memory to manifest itself into existence and for its enchantment to activate. He had maybe three seconds left…

Would a fall from that height kill him?

Sunny did not know, and he did not want to find out. Even if he survived somehow, a flood of Nightmare Creatures would soon flow out of the Gate to finish the job.

'D—damn!'

Something heavy and sharp suddenly slammed into Sunny's head. A torn piece of the wall's frame… following an instinct, Sunny reached forward and called upon the shadows of the falling pieces of debris. They moved, sliding toward his body.

Sunny made himself as light as he could, and then manifested the shadows. In the next moment, a vast mantle of darkness surrounded him like a streaming black cape, catching the wind and slowing down his fall.

It was almost enough.

He hit the ground hard enough to bounce off of it and black out for a moment. The mantle of shadows was torn apart and dissipated. Sunny rolled away, his body a mass of pain, vaguely recognizing the landscape of the staging area around him. He came to a halt after violently slamming into the feet of a loader robot, then weakly crawled under it, hoping to hide from the raining debris.

It was good thinking — not a second later, a piece of alloy that must have weighed several tons crashed into the ground in the spot where Sunny had been just a moment ago.

…That was all Sunny could do, though. After taking shelter between the legs of the loader, all strength seemed to abandon him. All that was left was pain.

'A—argh…'

He was alive, at least. Bone Weave and the Marble Shell, as well as

his Ascended physique, had protected Sunny's body from being severely damaged. He was a bit shocked, that was all…

Arguably, touching the Gate had caused much more harm. Sunny did not know what kind of damage he had received, but it felt serious. He knew he could still fight… maybe… but not right now.

Right now, he could hardly move.

'Not good…'

From his temporary shelter, Sunny had a clear view of the broken wall and the vast rift of nothingness pulsing darkly in the breach. A few soldiers and logistics specialists were running away from it, consumed by panic.

A few more lay dead, killed by the debris.

A tide of Nightmare Creatures was about to emerge from the Gate, flood the staging area, and devour everyone here before escaping into the city.

And Sunny was utterly defenseless.

A cold voice suddenly resounded in his ear:

"See. I told you that you're useless."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'Shut up.'

His own laughter was the answer.

"I also told you that Master Jet was going to die, didn't I?"

He growled.

"I said shut the hell up!"

Pushing through pain and weakness, Sunny forced himself to start crawling. He wanted to crawl away, but somehow found himself crawling toward the Gate. The desire to flee had been subtly defeated

by the desire to finish his job and defend the city, without him even noticing.

'I must have really lost it… what am I planning to do in this state?'

Maybe there was some trick left… no, there surely was. He was just too rattled and concussed to think of it.

There was the Dying Wish… huh… there was also Nightmare…

As a massive shape slowly revealed itself in the pulsating darkness of the Gate, a familiar voice whispered into his ear. Sunny felt a flash of fury sear his mind.

"Shut your mouth!"

But then, he froze.

That voice… was not his.

Ignoring the rude outburst, the Spell spoke:

[...Your Shadow has evolved.]

Chapter-999: The Fall of Falcon Scott (17)

'...My Shadow?'

Sunny opened his eyes wide.

'Saint!'

It seemed that Saint had finished her evolution into a Devil ahead of schedule. All things considered, her timing was nothing short of impeccable.

Even in his disoriented state, Sunny knew that he could not ignore such luck.

As the first of the Nightmare Creatures emerged from the Gate, he abandoned his attempts to crawl forward and called upon his Shadow, instead.

The coldness of the polar night seemed to grow slightly darker. Then, an intricate sabaton forged out of black, stonelike metal stepped on the ground beside him.

Sunny weakly turned his head to look up at Saint, who was as aloof as ever.

His taciturn knight… had changed.

Initially, she had been roughly the same height as him, becoming taller after evolving into a Demon. Now, Saint towered above Sunny. Obscured by the beautiful onyx armor, the lines of her stone body were still slender and graceful… but at more than two meters of height, the fearsome Shadow seemed extremely imposing.

Her oppressive presence was worthy of a Devil.

The black armor itself had not changed much — it had always been a product of magnificent craftsmanship, and seemed even more superb and menacing now. However, Saint's skin, which had been grey like stone before, then white as alabaster, was now as smooth and black as polished onyx — at least what little of it could be seen through the slits of her visor.

The ruby jewels of her eyes burned with ominous crimson flames.

Saint studied the vast rift of the Nightmare Gate indifferently, then glanced at Sunny. It almost seemed… as though she had a lot of questions.

He forced out a weak smile.

"Yeah… stuff happened. I'm glad to see you, too."

Then, he raised a trembling hand and pointed at the emerging Nightmare Creatures.

"Go… argh… go deal with them, if you don't mind. I'll stay here for a bit."

Saint lingered for a moment, then silently turned to the flood of monstrous creatures and walked forward. Her steps were calm and steady.

Sunny let his hand drop back to the ground.

'Ah, it's good to have her back.'

Hoisting himself up to sit, his back leaning against a piece of rubble, Sunny used some of his last essence to send the Broken Oath to the taciturn Devil. Then, he commanded all four of his shadows to abandon him and embrace Saint, instead.

Her tall figure shone with a dark radiance. The shadows around the demonic knight swelled, becoming deeper and darker, surrounding her like a tenebrous mantle… which was all expected.

What Sunny had not expected, however, was that there was a hint of true, elemental darkness in that lightless glow. It made him shiver.

…A few dozen meters away from them, the Nightmare Creatures were being born from the revolting nothingness of the Gate. A flood of them rushed forward, chasing after the retreating soldiers and non-combatants.

The abominations looked like tall, insectine humanoids with six hands each, their inhuman faces brimming with black eyes and jagged mandibles. They wore carapace armor and wielded weapons made of sharpened chitin, moving with astonishing speed and possessing dreadful might. As Sunny watched, one of the creatures easily threw a piece of the broken wall that must have weighed a ton aside.

Unfazed, Saint opened her arms, as if trying to embrace the broken, burning world. Darkness flowed from under her vambraces, over her palms, and into the air.

A moment later, the flowing darkness formed into the shape of a familiar stone sword — it was whole once again, but utterly black in appearance. A feeling of dark, nebulous power radiated from its stygian blade. On her other hand, a round shield of stonelike metal appeared, its surface the same polished onyx as the fearsome armor of the taciturn Shadow.

Walking toward the enemy, Saint raised her sword…

And struck the rim of her shield twice with its blade, as if challenging the harrowing tide of monsters.

***

'D—damn…'

Sunny was too weak and mentally shaken to do anything, so he just sat on the ground, using a piece of rubble for support, and watched Saint fight.

His Shadow had simply walked forward, and then dove into the mass of enemies as soon as the last of the soldiers ran past her. She

collided against the arachnid warriors with her shield, sending a dozen of them stumbling to the ground, and then turned into a whirlwind of annihilating darkness, her sword slicing through carapace armor, flesh, and bone as if nothing could stop it.

Black blood, severed limbs, and broken bodies covered the ground.

Saint was an Ascended Devil now, and augmented by all four of Sunny's shadows. The Broken Oath received the same augmentation, sapping strength and vitality from her enemies. The graceful knight fought with stunning clarity and sublime skill… and yet, that was not enough to explain why Saint was so deadly and devastating.

The abominations were not weak… it was she who was too strong, too fast, and too tyrannical. A simple evolution of one Class could not explain the difference.

'A Devil… a Devil commands unnatural powers. That is what separates them from Demons.'

Sunny's thoughts were slow and tangled, but he remembered that much.

What powers had Saint received?

'Might as well take a look.'

It was not like Sunny could be of much use, currently.

He lingered for a few moments, staring at the fearsome battle that was taking place merely two dozen meters or so away from him. Saint was holding back the whole mob of Nightmare Creatures by herself… for now. He did not know how long she would last, or whether the abominations would flow past the slaughtering Devil to escape into the city.

If they did, he would be the first one to die.

'Huh…'

Sunny gathered his thoughts and activated the healing property of the Dying Wish first. That, at least, did not demand any essence — or

maybe slowly accumulated it with each kill, creating a hidden reserve. The main effect of the enchantment had been deactivated long ago.

A wave of healing energy spread through his body, repairing the damage done to it and lessening the pain. He was still weak, muddled, and suffering, though — whatever touching the Gate had done to him seemed to be more than a mere physical wound.

'Whatever…'

Next, Sunny summoned Nightmare. He did not send the black stallion to join the battle yet, ordering him to stand guard above his master.

Somewhat satisfied with these measures, Sunny glanced at Saint again, and summoned the runes.

Chapter-1000: The Fall of Falcon Scott (18)

'What the hell am I doing…'

Indeed. The wall of the city was breached, a menacing Nightmare Gate was towering above him, and not too far away, a furious battle was raging in the rabble of the staging area. And yet, Sunny was staring at the runes that shimmered brightly in the air in front of him.

His vision was a little blurry, but the runes were clear and perfectly legible, as if existing outside of reality. Which they probably did.

'Oh, well…'

Sunny needed a couple of minutes to recover, anyway.

He looked at the field of runes, searching for the names of his Shadows. A new string of them replaced the old one:

[Onyx Saint]

'Onyx, huh…'

That had a nice ring to it.

Marble Saint had turned into Onyx Saint. Was his Marble Shell going to evolve into the Onyx Shell, as well, once he Transcended?

Sunny would have loved to pursue that train of thought, but unfortunately, he couldn't. His thoughts were slow and erratic, refusing to consider anything too complicated.

Giving up, he concentrated on the runes of Saint's name and started to read the descriptions.

Shadow: Onyx Saint.

Shadow Rank: Ascended.

Shadow Class: Devil.

Shadow Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Ember of Divinity], [Heart of Darkness].

'Heart of Darkness… that's new.'

Sunny glanced at the mass of attacking arachnid warriors, catching a glimpse of Saint decapitating an especially menacing abomination with a swift slash of her black sword, then sending its body flying into the mob with a strike of her shield. Even before the rim of the shield connected with the creature's chest, the blade of the stone sword was already moving to deflect an incoming blow.

'...She's not dead yet.'

He looked back to the runes.

Attribute Description: [A vestige of an ancient darkness dwells in this Shadow's heart, granting her tenebrous powers.]

So, Saint had not just destroyed the sphere of black stone in the tunnel… she had taken something from it. Sunny had expected as much.

The [Spark of Divinity] was also gone, replaced by the [Ember of Divinity]. The light of divinity and true darkness now coexisted within Saint, somehow… there was something interesting about that fact, but Sunny, in his pitiful state, could not quite point to what.

'Later…'

The sounds of the battle grew louder, and a little closer, forcing him to look past the runes nervously and then hurry up. The Gate Guardian could arrive at any moment…

Sunny lowered his gaze.

Shadow Abilities: [Weapon Sage], [Underworld Armament], [Mantle of Darkness], [Blade of Darkness].

'Two new ones.'

The name of the first Ability was a bit familiar. He concentrated on it and read:

Ability: [Mantle of Darkness].

Ability Description: [Darkness embraces this Shadow. When surrounded by darkness, and true darkness more so, her swiftness and might will increase. Her wounds will be healed, and her heart will grow fuller.]

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Well… that explains how she is so powerful right now.'

If there was one thing that Antarctica did not lack, it was darkness. Although the staging area was usually well lit, most tech nearby had been destroyed by the pulse of the opening Gate. Saint was wreathed in shadows.

The physical augmentation of the [Mantle of Darkness] seemed to be a formidable one, and combined with the embrace of his four shadows, it produced a truly terrific result.

What made him especially happy was that Saint would also be able to heal herself from now on, at least when surrounded by darkness. That alone was an incredible boon.

The last part of the description spoke of her heart, but the rune could also mean soul. Sunny suspected that it alluded to both the true darkness dwelling in Saint's heart, and her essence… or whatever it was that the Shadow used instead of essence. The point was that its replenishment rate would be increased.

These abilities… were very similar to what the Black Knight had possessed, with one serious caveat.

Unlike the Fallen Devil of the ruined cathedral, his own Ascended

Devil seemed to possess dual affinity — both to the shadows and to the elemental darkness. Those were supposed to be mutually exclusive, but were not, in her case. It seemed that Saint's nature as a Shadow led to a curious result…

His graceful knight paradoxically enjoyed the favor of both mundane and true darkness. Recalling how harrowing his journey through the underground tunnel had been, Sunny could not help but feel envious.

'Interesting…'

Finally, he turned his gaze to the second of the two new Abilities…

[Blade of Darkness].

Ability Description: [The true darkness dwelling in this Shadow's heart can be summoned in the form of a fearsome weapon, as long as the Shadow has mastered the use of that weapon. The Blade of Darkness can slay those of flesh and those of spirit; it never dulls, never falters, and never breaks. Alternatively, the darkness can be summoned to augment a mundane weapon.]

Sunny smiled.

'So she fixed her sword herself, in the end…'

The Blade of Darkness was a truly powerful Ability, indeed. Since Saint was a Battle Master and a Weapon Sage, she could wield any weapon with superb proficiency… which meant that the true darkness she was a vessel of could take any form.

The dark weapon would be as strong as Saint was herself, growing stronger if Saint evolved again in the future. It was capable of killing both corporeal and incorporeal creatures. It could even be used to augment an existing weapon or a weapon-type Memory, both making it more powerful and adding an elemental property to its attacks.

All of it was simply amazing.

And when Sunny gathered enough Memories…

He flinched when something thundered, sending a strong shockwave

through the ground. Looking past the runes, Sunny saw a massive shape emerging from the Gate.

The Guardian had arrived.

Somewhere beyond the wall, Sky Tide was still fighting the Devouring Cloud. The wall had been breached, and he had no idea if the other Irregulars still lived. Master Jet was nowhere to be seen, and probably…

'No, don't think about it! She won't be so easily killed, anyway.'

…And lastly, Saint was standing her ground against a whole swarm of dreadful Nightmare Creatures, surrounded by nothing but enemies and carnage. Even as powerful as she had become, the force arrayed against her was still dire and overwhelming.

Sunny let out a tortured sigh.

"Ah, no rest for the wicked…"

Struggling against pain and sickening weakness, he staggered to his feet and grabbed Nightmare, afraid that he might fall again. Then, Sunny looked at the Gate and the tide of Nightmare Creatures flowing out of it. A strange expression appeared on his face.

'I might die… but I do need more Memories, so… I guess my greed is much greater than my fear?'

With that, he groaned and hoisted himself on top of his black steed.

It was time to join the fight...

Chapter-1001: The Fall of Falcon Scott (19)

Sunny knew that he would not be able to do a lot in this fight… but then again, he did not have to. Right now, his role was to support Saint and let his Shadows do all the heavy lifting.

Maybe that was how he was supposed to fight every battle, really… but sadly, fate rarely gave him such opportunities.

In any case, there was one thing that he could do. Dismissing the Sin of Solace and the Dying Wish to get back a bit of essence, he summoned the Shadow Lantern instead. As soon as it manifested, Sunny tossed the Lantern in the direction where the towering Gate Guardian — a monstrous arachnid wielding six weapons carved of bone — advanced on Saint.

He did not have enough essence to sustain the divine Memory's enchantment for long, but he did have enough to open its gate, unleashing a swarm of shadows onto the battlefield. The darkness enveloping it grew even deeper than it had been before.

In the next moment, Sunny and Nightmare slammed into the crowd of the abominations.

'Crap!'

The rest of the battle… was a hazy mayhem of violence.

Sunny struggled to remain atop his black steed, lamenting that there had not been enough time to saddle it. At some point, he simply slid to the ground, using Nightmare's body to shield himself from the enemies. Not trusting himself to wield a weapon that demanded strength in his weakened state, Sunny summoned the Moonlight Shard instead.

A beautiful chalice of white jade appeared in his other hand. Submerging the narrow blade of the ghostly stiletto into the black liquid, he used it to strike at the cracks in the enemy armor and finish off those abominations that Nightmare had wounded with his fangs, horns, and steel hooves.

At some point, other soldiers and Awakened joined the fight. More Nightmare Creatures emerged from the Gate, and more humans threw themselves into the meat grinder to stop the enemy from reaching the streets of the city. Their resistance was desperate and haphazard, but for now, at least, they held the tide of abominations back.

Beyond the wall, obscured by the hideous rift of the Nightmare Gate, the sky was painted white by lightning.

Sunny knew that they were going to win when the Spell whispered into his ear, its voice drowning out the sounds of the battle:

[You have slain a Corrupted Devil, Silkway Archon.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Staggering back, he let out a relieved sigh and glanced in the direction where Saint had been fighting the Gate Guardian. The creature lay sprawled on the ground, its limbs severed and its massive body cleaved apart. His Shadow was standing above it, her black blade already seeking another target.

Saint's armor was battered, and there were thin streams of fine ruby dust flowing from the breaches. However, wreathed in darkness, her body seemed to be healing already. Without ever slowing down, she shook the dark blood off her sword, and dashed forward to face a new enemy.

…With the Gate Guardian slain, the scales of battle slowly started to tip in favor of humans. Sunny was not of much use, but with Saint and Nightmare rampaging amidst the abominations, dealing with them was not an insurmountable task.

And then, almost abruptly… the battle was over.

Sunny leaned tiredly on a piece of rubble, observing the scene of utter slaughter. His armor was bloodied, but his body was nearly devoid of wounds — most had been healed by the Dying Wish, and the rest were repaired by the [Living Stone].

Having a magical shell reinforcing his skin was very handy.

He still felt terrible, though…

Around him, Awakened and mundane soldiers were busy building improvised barricades around the Gate. The first wave of abominations might have been destroyed, but more could emerge from the rift at any moment. A few of them suddenly froze, staring at a menacing black figure that had emerged from the darkness into the dim light.

Saint's eyes burned with demonic crimson light, and her onyx armor was glistening, awash in the blood of the arachnid warriors. She looked both graceful and terrifying.

One of the soldiers raised his rifle with trembling hands, but the other suddenly shouted, his eyes wide:

"Mongrel! It's Lord Mongrel!"

A hum of voices soon rose above the barricade:

"Mongrel is in Falcon Scott!"

"He killed the Gate Guardian! It was him!"

"It's clearly a she, you idiot... thank you, Lady Mongrel!"

"We're saved!"

Ignoring them, Saint passed between the invigorated soldiers indifferently, the Broken Oath long dismissed. She approached Sunny and froze, looming above him like a beautiful monument of darkness. Her ruby eyes stared at him intently.

Unaccustomed to craning his neck to look at Saint, Sunny awkwardly cleared his throat.

"Uh… good job out there. You really saved my skin."

She lingered for a few moments, slowly raised her hand…

And poked him in the cheek with a finger.

Then, Saint tilted her head slightly, as if studying him. Her ruby eyes betrayed a hint of some unknown emotion, making Sunny blink.

'What is happening?'

Without saying anything… of course… the taciturn Shadow then took a step back and turned away, looking at the Gate.

However, she seemed strangely pleased.

Sunny blinked a few more times, then rubbed his cheek.

'Huh… alright?'

Was it because of the Marble Shell?

He shook his head, knowing that there was no time to waste pondering the weird occurrence. Maybe he imagined the whole thing…

"Anyway, I have to go. Stay here in case more Nightmare Creatures emerge, and don't let any of them escape into the city. I'll… leave Nightmare with you."

Sunny had to find out if the battle against the Devouring Cloud was over… whether there were more Gates that had opened within the city… how his men were doing…

Most importantly, he had to find Master Jet.

Leaving the gloomy shadow with Saint, he wrapped the other three around his body, grimaced, and started walking. Despite the fact that there were no physical wounds on his body, Sunny still felt hurt. Every step was a struggle.

But what else was new?

Whispering quiet curses, he summoned the Cruel Sight to use as a walking stick, and headed deeper into the staging area.

Chapter-1002: The Fall of Falcon Scott (20)

Sunny did not have to wander the stretch of the staging area that had been ruined by the destruction of the wall for long. It was a mess, with collapsed prefab buildings laying shattered and broken, buried under piles of alloy debris. Finding anyone here would have been a challenge.

Before he allowed himself to drown in dark thoughts, however, a familiar black bird appeared from above and landed on a bent steel beam protruding from the ground nearby.

The Crow waved its wings, clearly agitated, and cawed:

"Jet! Jet!"

Sunny let out a shaky breath, feeling a lot of relief. If the Echo was still here, Soul Reaper couldn't be dead. He took a step toward the bird and asked:

"Where is she?"

Instead of answering, the Crow flew away, landed on a communication relay a dozen meters away, and looked back expectantly.

In this way, the Echo led Sunny to Master Jet.

After finding her, Sunny remained silent for a few moments. Then, he coughed.

"Well, uh… that was not what I expected to see."

Jet was hanging upside down, her body caught in the jagged mess of

torn alloy beams. One of them was piercing her abdomen like a hook, and her arm was caught between two others. Despite the ghastly situation, there was a calm and slightly annoyed expression on Soul Reaper's face.

"Yeah, well. Care to help me get down? I can do it myself, of course, but… I would prefer for my insides to remain on the inside for a little bit longer."

She could probably free herself. Simple alloy would not have held back a Master for long… but with how thoroughly trapped Jet was, ripping herself off the hook would have probably exacerbated her wounds by a lot. Not everyone had the lineage of a tenacious daemon to help them recover and skin as hard as enchanted marble.

Sunny studied the tangled mess of alloy beams, then floated up with the help of the Dark Wing and carefully pulled Master Jet off the jagged hook. With a quiet hiss, she slid off the bloodied alloy and fell down, landing softly on her feet.

"Argh, damn it..."

Jet clutched her abdomen with a grimace, and then slowly straightened. Sunny landed nearby and looked at her with concern.

"That… are you going to be alright?"

Instead of answering, Soul Reaper spat a mouthful of blood, then looked at him with a dark smile. Her teeth were all painted red, so the smile was not very reassuring.

"Don't worry about it. I am a very sturdy girl… woman. Whatever. The point is, it will be as good as new in a couple of days, even without a healer."

Sunny scratched the back of his head, then hesitated for a few moments. Eventually, he said:

"...I was afraid that you died."

Master Jet laughed, then winced and clutched her wound tighter.

"Died? That's… the last thing you should be afraid of. Believe me, Sunny, I won't die on this godforsaken continent. It's impossible."

He shook his head at her bravado, then sighed.

"Alright. Do you want me to tell you how the battle went?"

Soul Reaper waved her hand.

"Crow saw it. Good job handling the Gate… I am a bit embarrassed that I wasn't there to help. There are several others that opened either near or within the city. All of them were contained, it's just this particular one that was an unpleasant surprise. The Devouring Cloud also seems to have retreated, for now."

She frowned.

"You noticed it too, right?"

Sunny nodded with a dark expression.

"A new tyrant must have risen from within the swarm. The damned leeches were acting too purposefully."

Master Jet used his shoulder for support and pulled him forward. They slowly walked through the ruins of the staging area, looking like two cripples.

"Yeah… that is why the Devouring Cloud pulled away before being destroyed. It will probably be back later."

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

'Gods… there are so many priority targets converging on the city. I hoped that we would destroy at least one today.'

He glanced at Jet, his eyes tired.

"So what do we do now?"

She simply shrugged.

"Go find our people. Rest, recover. Prepare to repeat the whole thing

tomorrow."

Indeed. What else was there to do?

Life was a constant struggle.

Since the wall was broken now, they had to find an elevator that would take them to the proper side of the breach. Even worse, the pulse of the Gate had destroyed a lot of fine machinery, so finding a working platform was not easy. Eventually, however, they made it to the top of the defensive barrier and returned to the position of the Irregulars.

The first one they saw was Winter, who sat tiredly on the alloy surface of the battlement, her eyes hidden once again behind the sunglasses. A thin crack ran through one of the lenses. Hearing their steps, she turned her head slightly.

A pale smile appeared on her face.

"The heroes return. You two... look like crap."

Master Jet scoffed, which caused her to wince once again.

"Thanks for the compliment."

Sunny helped her sit down, then looked around, searching for his cohort. Noticing the towering figure of Dorn a dozen or so meters away, he sighed with relief and asked, his voice almost devoid of tension:

"So, how did it go? Do we have any casualties?"

Winter did not respond, prompting him to look down.

Her face was uncharacteristically somber.

Sunny felt something cold brush against his heart.

"What?"

The Ascended Archer sighed, then looked down.

"About that… I'm sorry, Sunny. Things were a bit chaotic back there."

He remained motionless for a while, then turned away and silently headed toward where he had seen Dorn. As Sunny approached, he mentally counted:

'Dorn, Belle… Luster, Kim… Samara…'

When he reached the cohort, they turned to him, their faces pale and grim. Kim's eyes were glistening, and she avoided looking directly at him.

Luster was the first one to speak, his tone subdued.

"Captain! We… we…"

Sunny cut him off.

"Show me."

They stepped aside, revealing the figure of Quentin, who was laying on the cold alloy with his eyes closed. Sunny found himself taking a few steps forward and kneeling beside the gallant healer.

His face was calm, and his body seemed untouched except for a shallow wound on the side of his head.

His chest was rising and falling, which meant that Quentin was still alive.

He had not been killed… he had just lost consciousness.

However, it did not matter.

Sunny closed his eyes.

…Quentin had lost consciousness near an active Gate, which meant that his soul was stolen away by the Call.

He had been thrown into an unexplored, dire region of the Dream Realm, surrounded by numerous Nightmare Creatures and abominations so vile that words could not describe them. His only

chance of survival was to fight his way to a Seed, challenge it, and conquer the Second Nightmare alone.

For all intents and purposes, Quentin was already dead.

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A few hours later, Sunny found himself alone in the Rhino. The area surrounding the military barracks was quiet, and the interior of the APC was dark. He sat on his bed, unmoving, his eyes like two pools of darkness.

He was cold.

'It is what it is.'

War was like that. People died all the time… Sunny had sent many to their deaths himself. He was not new to losing soldiers.

And yet…

He was weak, his body and soul were both in pain because of the brush with the Nightmare Gate, but somehow, his heart hurt much worse.

There was a lot for him to do. Feeding Saint, continuing his attempts to weave a Memory from the devil's needle. However, Sunny felt unwilling to move. Or maybe incapable.

He just sat silently and stared into the darkness.

After some time, his communicator lit up. He looked at it, then slowly brought the screen to his face.

There was a new message from Rain.

"Rain: Hey, Sunny! It is really hard to imagine that it is winter in Antarctica, and that the night there lasts for many months. And that aurora thing you described… I looked it up on the network, and wow! It's so pretty! There's nothing like that in NQSC. Well, you know, we can hardly even see stars here, because of the light pollution and the air being full of dust.

However, the weather is warm and the nights are short, so I won't complain. You stay warm, too! Nothing really interesting happened to me. Did anything interesting happen to you? How are you doing? I hope everything is alright."

Sunny remained motionless for a while, staring at the screen.

Then, he closed his eye for a moment, took a deep breath, and started writing a response.

"Sunny: Hey, Rain. Lots of interesting things happened to me, of course. I am one of the most interesting people in two whole worlds, after all. Didn't you know? I am doing great, too! I mean, all things considered.

Since I am such a dashing and heroic figure, people go around giving me sandwiches, medals, and the like. So..."

Sunny paused for a few seconds, then briefly wiped his eyes and continued.

"...life is pretty sweet!"

Chapter-1003: The Fall of Falcon Scott (21)

"Hold, you wretches!"

A mass of Nightmare Creatures was advancing through a city street, mere meters away from slamming into a makeshift barricade formed by the hulking frames of firing MWPs. The surface of the road was broken and melted, and the ruins of the surrounding buildings were enveloped in flames.

Leaping off a slowly collapsing roof, Sunny plummeted down and landed between the abominations. The jade blade of the Sin of Solace moved, sending fountains of blood into the air. He dashed sideways, dodging a stream of bullets, and groaned.

It was already the second week of the siege, but the damage done to his body and soul by the Nightmare Gate was slow to heal. Sunny shrugged off the pain and called upon the shadows, erecting a black wall of them to block off the street.

"Flamethrowers!"

The pilots of the MWPs did not stop firing their mass drivers, but long streams of orange-red fire shot from their wrists over the wall. Sunny danced between the flames, circulating his essence to activate the Underworld Armament. The effect of the Memory of Fire was enhanced, elevating his elemental resistance even higher.

The Nightmare Creatures were not that lucky.

While he dealt with the head of the swarm, Belle and Dorn attacked its tail from the flanks. A sharp sword and a heavy sledgehammer made short work of the frenzied abominations, and at the same time, charged tungsten rounds flashed from a nearby dormitory tower,

slaying the most dangerous targets without fail.

Caught between the hammer and the anvil, the swarm swiftly melted. The last one to die was a hideous creature with hardy scales covering its reptilian body. Sunny simply struck the abomination with the edge of his palm, turning it as heavy as a boulder and as hard as stone. The reptile's skull shattered, disintegrating into a disgusting rain of blood and bone.

Even before the heavy body touched the ground, the Spell was already whispering:

[You have slain an Awakened Monster, Scaled Prowler.]

[You have received a Memory.]

His eyes glinted.

'Another Memory!'

Wiping his hand with a revolted expression, Sunny looked around. Luster and Kim appeared on a nearby roof, signaling that none of the creatures escaped. He let out a sigh of relief.

…The situation was under control.

After the ill-fated battle with the Devouring Cloud, the pressure on the defenders of Falcon Scott had steadily increased. The fact that there was a giant breach in the wall did not help things one bit.

Eventually, the defensive barrier had been broken through in two more places, forcing the First Army to evacuate civilians deeper into the city and create a secondary ring of defense on the empty streets.

The topography of the siege was not simple anymore. Humans still held the wall, deflecting most of the Nightmare Creatures from its height — but now, various sections of the great barrier were separated, almost turning into independent fortresses. A detachment of soldiers was tasked with defending the breaches from the ground.

They mostly managed to prevent the Nightmare Creatures from breaking through the barricades into the city, even if the rate of

casualties among the ground crews was much higher. However, some abominations still reached the streets from time to time.

Sunny had just dealt with one of these invading swarms.

'That's the fourth one today… not a good sign.'

He bent in a painful coughing fit, feeling a sickening weakness permeate his body once again. After a while, the coughing subsided, and Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, breathed hoarsely and waiting for the weakness to subside.

Soon, it was gone, and all that remained was a gnawing pain in his chest.

"Damnation…"

He straightened and glanced at his people, who were making their way through the burning carnage of the destroyed city street. Once they reached him — everyone except Samara, who was still in her sniper nest on top of the empty dormitory tower — Sunny glanced at Kim and asked:

"Any updates from Soul Reaper?"

She nodded.

"Yes, sir. Master Dale pushed the enemy back, reclaiming control over Breach C. We are ordered to stand down and rest. Our next shift starts in sixteen hours."

Sunny tiredly rubbed his face.

"Sixteen hours, huh? Either Army Command is feeling generous, or they expect real trouble tomorrow. Well… all the more reason to make sure that we're fresh and full of essence. Signal Sam to come down and retreat to the barracks."

He studied his soldiers for a moment, making sure that none of them was wounded. Without… without a healer in the cohort, recovering between battles had become somewhat tricky. It demanded outside help, at least.

Fortunately, the members of the cohort were unscathed. He nodded, letting them go, and turned around.

The MWPs stood motionless, the incandescent barrels of their guns glowing in the gloom. The coolant liquid was dripping down, evaporating into clouds of haze. Some pilots had opened the cockpits, sitting on the doors of the hatches with tired expressions on their faces. They would retreat inside soon, chased back into the overheated war machines by smoke and the smell of charred corpses.

But, for now at least, the soldiers were enjoying the short moment of respite in the coldness of the neverending night.

Noticing Sunny, one of the pilots raised a hand and made it into a fist. Sunny returned the stalwart salute, and then silently walked away.

A few minutes later, he stumbled, grabbing a wall in a dark and isolated alley. The Sin of Solace whispered, mocking him, but it was not too hard to suppress the hateful voice these days. Sunny rested for a few moments, and then took a step back.

Saint emerged from the shadows, as silent and menacing as ever. Nightmare joined her, moonlight glinting on his adamantine horns.

Sunny sighed and summoned the Overpriced Saddle. Fastening its straps on the black stallion, he glanced at the two Shadows and said:

"You know what to do. I'll return in sixteen hours… be cautious today. Chances are, we'll have to go all out tomorrow."

Saint nodded indifferently, then mounted the dark destrier and outstretched a hand. Sunny placed the hilt of the Sin of Solace into it, at the same time sending two of his shadows forth. Then, he watched the taciturn knight leave as she headed in the direction of the wall.

These days, the two of them worked in shifts. If the Devil of Antarctica was not defending Falcon Scott, the Guardian Angel of Antarctica did.

Millions of people had already been evacuated from the doomed city, but millions more remained. The siege capital could not be allowed

to fall, yet.

Sunny coughed some more, uttered a quiet curse, and walked in the opposite direction of where Saint had left.

Chapter-1004: The Fall of Falcon Scott (22)

As he walked through the empty streets, Sunny breathed in the cold winter air and tried to calm his wildly beating heart. He should not have been that fatigued, but he was. The strange ailment tormenting him had become less severe in the last couple of days, however, it was not gone yet.

'Ah, curse it…'

Sunny grimaced, then noticed a group of soldiers ahead and forced himself to put on the mask of a confident commander. Mundane humans looked up to Masters, and if they saw one walking around with hollow eyes and a troubled expression, their morale would suffer.

He had never thought that being preoccupied with concerns about people's morale would become something he bothered with, yet here he was.

As Sunny walked closer, he heard bits and pieces of their conversation.

"I saw Mongrel fight yesterday. Gods, he truly is a fiend. My whole unit would have been dead if not for him. I wish I could thank the man… but he is definitely not from the First Army. Maybe he's a Legacy from a local Antarctica clan?"

"No, no… haven't you heard the rumors? Mongrel is that Master from the First Irregular Company. The Devil."

"You lost your damn mind, fool. Mongrel is like two meters tall, while Master Sunless is on the shorter side. Believe me, I saw them side by side, the day the wall was first breached. Also, Mongrel is definitely a

woman."

"Yeah, I saw it too. She even caressed his cheek… well, uh, more like poked it. Wait… guys, do you think there's something going on between them?"

"You are all idiots. Mongrel is obviously several people…"

Usually, hearing such conversations amused Sunny, but this time he remained detached and indifferent. The soldiers grew silent when he approached, straightened, and then bowed respectfully. He nodded at them in passing and continued on his way, uncaring.

'Ah. But that reminds me…'

Sunny summoned the runes and glanced at the description of Saint:

Shadow Fragments: [185/200].

'So close.'

With the two Memories he received today — one from an Awakened Monster, the other from a Fallen Beast — the counter would increase by two fragments, bringing it to one hundred and eighty-seven. From here, he only needed thirteen more for Saint to Transcend.

He was somewhat pressed for time, but also had a few of his personal Memories that could be sacrificed to accelerate the process. Things were still going according to plan.

'It's the weaving that is the problem… I feel like I am almost there, but the Midnight Shard is still giving me trouble. Too risky.'

Sunny pondered the intricacies of the spellweave, grimacing when the thundering clamor of the distant battle grew especially loud and made it harder to think.

Gradually, the noise became quieter, although it never went away entirely. Sunny passed through the barricades, left the secondary defense ring, and entered the crowded streets of Falcon Scott.

Despite the fact that numerous civilians had to be relocated deeper

into the city, the signs of the overpopulation were not as dire as one could have expected. The naval convoy had been busy ferrying the refugees across the strait, after all. By now, somewhere around eighty million people had already been transported to the relative — extremely so — safety of Eastern Antarctica.

It almost looked as though Army Command's plan was working.

Seeing actual proof that all his efforts were not in vain made Sunny feel a little better.

Up ahead, a crowd of refugees was waiting in line to receive rations. He studied it for a moment, noticing a familiar figure handing out packs of synthpaste at the front.

Sunny smiled a little, then headed in that direction. As he walked closer, the person growled without looking up:

"You better not be cutting the line, ba…"

Then, Beth looked up and blinked a couple of times.

"Oh, Sunny? What are you doing here?"

He shrugged.

"On my way back from the wall."

She called one of the other volunteers to switch with her, then led him aside, to a humming heat projector. Beth stopped in front of it, shivering and rubbing her hands together.

"How was your day?"

Sunny remained silent for a bit, not knowing how to answer.

"Hectic."

The young woman glanced at him and scoffed.

"A man of few words, are you now?"

Sunny shrugged again.

"How is the old man? Did you guys receive placement in the queue yet?"

Beth sighed.

"...No. People say that another ship went down in the strait, so many placements were postponed again. As for Professor, he is doing fine. The Army got him consulting on how to upgrade the communication array, so he has something to do, at least."

She looked at him questioningly.

"Are you coming over today?"

Sunny hesitated, then slowly shook his head.

"No. There's a lot I have to do. Also… my gut tells me that tomorrow will be a tough day. Your dormitory is away from the wall, but still. Be careful. Well, you know the drill."

The young woman turned back to the heat projector.

"Yeah, yeah..."

Then, she suddenly opened the bag hanging over her shoulder, scrounged in it, and took out a tube of toothpaste.

"Here. You forgot this last time."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"I did not forget it. I left it for you, because I know that the supply chain is in shambles."

Beth tilted her head and looked at him fiercely.

"You think I can't get us some toothpaste?!"

Sunny laughed.

"I mean… if you are so principled, then why are you not returning the two cans of coffee I left in your dormitory, as well?"

The young woman looked down, her cheeks turning slightly red.

"That… what cans of coffee? I haven't seen anything of the sort!"

Sunny nodded a couple of times and gently pushed the toothpaste away.

"Okay, okay. Anyway, I'll try to drop by soon. If you do find that coffee, please enjoy it."

He bid Beth an awkward farewell and walked away, feeling slightly refreshed.

Here in the city proper, public transportation was still functioning. There were military vehicles rolling down the streets, as well. It did not take him long to reach the barracks.

Entering the Rhino, Sunny looked around, his gaze pausing on one of the closed sleeping pods. Then, he walked to the back of the APC, dragged the devil's needle from its place on the floor of the armory, and sighed.

'Fifteen hours left… but I probably should sleep for at least a couple…'

Shaking his head, he got to work.

Chapter-1005: The Fall of Falcon Scott (23)

Sunny did not recall falling asleep, but he was woken up by someone banging on the hatch of the Rhino. Sitting up, he looked around and realized that he must have passed out while studying the weave of the Midnight Shard. The austere tachi was still laying on the holographic table, glinting as if to mock him.

He had almost solved the problem. That elusive element of the weave was almost isolated, but to...

As someone banged on the hatch once again, making the massive APC shake a little, Sunny flinched, rubbed his face, and went to the hatch.

"Coming! Who the hell…"

He opened the hatch and froze, swallowing the rest of his irritated shout.

"Oh, ah… Master Jet. Good… morning?"

She glanced at him with amusement.

"Technically, it's evening. Go wipe the drool off your face and come out, Sunny. We've been summoned to attend a meeting."

He frowned, then threw an angry look at the gloomy shadow, which was hiding in the darkness not too far away. The bastard was supposed to warn him if anything approached, protecting Sunny from a sudden attack… or from embarrassing himself, in theory.

The shadow shrugged innocently and looked away.

Shaking his head, Sunny returned inside and quickly washed his face. A couple of minutes later, he left the APC and closed the hatch behind him. Since Soul Reaper mentioned that he had to come out, they were most likely heading for the complex that the local branch of the First Army Command used as headquarters. It was only a short distance from the barracks.

Indeed, Jet walked in that direction, with Sunny following as he looked around with sleepy eyes. A few moments later, he asked:

"...What is the meeting about?"

She shrugged.

"We'll find out. All I know is that White Feather wants to see us."

'White Feather, huh…'

The two of them made their way to the army headquarters, but then walked past it, approaching a heavily fortified compound instead. Winter and Dale were already waiting for them near the gates, looking as ragged and fatigued as Sunny.

He greeted them.

"I heard you retook Breach C yesterday? Must have been a tough fight."

Dale simply shrugged.

"Not really. We still hold both sections of the wall above the breach, so all I had to do was persuade the abominations to stay put until the garrison forces shredded them with ranged weapons."

He remained silent for moment, and then added:

"Things would have been much worse if they were better climbers, though."

Sunny nodded somberly.

Together, they entered the compound and were led to a spacious

room on one of the underground levels. There, two people were waiting for them.

Master Roan was standing in front of a false window, studying the projected image of the night sky. His face was painted ghostly green by the ethereal tapestry of the swirling aurora. Saint Tyris was motionless, sitting in an imposing chair with her back held straight.

Sunny had not seen Sky Tide in a while — at least in her human form. She looked… battered.

Her elegant armor was bent and broken, white steel marred by dried blood. Her hair, which had once fallen down like a cascade of pale gold, now looked lifeless and bleak. Her dazzlingly beautiful face was pale, blackened by ugly bruises.

It seemed that holding the Winter Beast back was taking a toll on the Transcendent of the White Feather clan.

…Her expression was still aloof and stern, however, and her amber eyes burned with the same fierce, cold resolve.

Master Roan turned at the sound of the steps.

"Ah. Ascended Jet, Ascended Winter, Ascended Dale, Sunless… welcome. Sorry for the sudden invitation."

Sunny noticed black circles under the handsome man's eyes. Roan was acting uncharacteristically subdued, his usual charisma gone. That did not bode well.

Master Jet waved a hand.

"War waits for no one. What did you want to discuss?"

Roan smiled slightly.

"Straight to business… well, it is for the best. There is not much time to prepare."

He walked away from the false window and stopped beside Sky Tide, then gestured at the holographic projection in front of them. On it,

the map of the surrounding area disappeared, replaced by the blurry image of a grotesque creature.

Leathery wings, lean body with six segmented legs, a tail that ended with a long, jagged stinger… and three long necks, each ending in a harrowing circular maw. The abominations looked like a mix between a wyvern, a worm, and a scorpion. It was large, formidable, and utterly hideous.

"Our scouts have confirmed that the Devouring Cloud has produced a new Tyrant. A Fallen one, but still a dire threat to the survival of the city. The creature mostly hides within the swarm, controlling it from behind."

Winter cursed.

"Yeah. We figured as much, after the last time."

Master Roan slowly nodded.

"It is our priority to eliminate the Tyrant. The Devouring Cloud will descend on Falcon Scott today. You will be the blade to strike its puppeteer down."

The Irregulars glanced at each other. After a short pause, Jet asked:

"How do you know that the swarm will come?"

Roan frowned slightly, but before he could answer, Saint Tyris suddenly spoke:

"Because our clan will lure it here."

The four Ascended grew silent, looking at her incredulously. Sky Tide met their gazes with a calm expression, her face as motionless as ever. Somewhat stunned by that confession, Sunny asked:

"Why the hell would you do that?"

Sky Tide inhaled deeply, then turned away.

"Goliath draws near. We have to eradicate other threats before he

comes. If they attack together… you can imagine the devastation. The window of opportunity grows narrower with each day, so we can't passively wait for the Devouring Cloud to return anymore. So, Roan and other Awakened warriors of my clan will lure it here. Today."

She glanced at the Irregulars, studied them for a few moments, and added:

"Ascended Winter will contain the swarm. Roan will bring the Tyrant down. The three of you will make sure that the creature never takes flight again. That is the battle plan."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"What if Winter fails to hold back the swarm? What if Roan fails to isolate the Tyrant? What if the three of us fail to kill it in time?"

Saint Tyris looked at him for a while, her amber eyes both beautiful and cold. Then, she said simply:

"Don't fail."

Master Jet laughed. Shaking her head, she patted Sunny on the shoulder and walked toward the projection of the Fallen Tyrant.

"Alright. I like that plan. Let's discuss the details…"

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The discussion did not take long. Soon, the Irregulars said their goodbyes to Sky Tide and headed to the exit, each in a hurry to prepare for the coming battle. Sunny, however, stayed back after a bit of hesitation.

When there were only three of them left in the room — Sky Tide, Roan, and him — Sunny glanced at the battered Transcendent with a complicated expression.

After a few moments, he said:

"You must have heard that another of Valor's Saints was killed."

Saint Tyris stared at him silently, not saying anything.

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"You and I have helped that monster escape from the Night Temple. If it weren't for you, I would have been dead, and Mordret would have still been contained. Do you regret saving me now that he is out there, slaughtering people?"

Sky Tide remained motionless for a bit, then shook her head.

"No."

A pale smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"Why?"

She sighed.

"Years ago, when the young Prince of War came to the Chained Isles, I offered him my hospitality. Like any other Awakened, he was under my protection… roaming the Dream Realm in search of something, much like you did. When Valor plotted to ambush and eliminate him, I followed orders and did nothing to prevent it. I have carried the shame of that wrongdoing ever since."

He pondered her words for a few moments.

"They had a very good reason to get rid of him, though. That guy is like a Nightmare Creature. There's not much human left in him."

Saint Tyris looked him in the eye, her beautiful face expressionless.

"Is it worth it, to do the wrong thing for the right reason? No. Life is unpredictable, and the future is unclear. All we can strive for is to act according to our principles, and do what we consider right. The rest doesn't matter."

Sunny looked around, his gaze lingering on the traces of dried blood on Sky Tide's armor. His eyes turned dark.

"Doing the right thing is what got you and your clan banished to this

hellhole."

She looked at the false window, where the image of the night sky was projected. A full moon was shining on its velvet expanse, surrounded by the lights of the ghostly aurora.

A hint of some deep, hidden emotion appeared on Sky Tide's beautiful face. After a while, she said:

"The sky is suffocating here. But other than that… this is precisely where I wanted to be."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then bowed slightly to Master Roan, and silently walked away.

He had to prepare for battle.

Chapter-1006: The Fall of Falcon Scott (24)

Standing on the battlement and peering into the cold darkness beyond, Sunny had a contemplative expression on his face. The wind smelled of snow as it played with his black hair, which had grown a bit too long by now. Pale moonlight permeated the air, failing to reach the ravaged land.

Winter and Dale were sitting nearby, leaning on the alloy parapet of the wall and sharing a flask. The two captains seemed calm — one in her usual relaxed manner, the other solemn and staid. As the contents of the flask ran out, Winter sighed and looked at Sunny.

"You seem terribly serious today."

He lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

"Just thinking about stuff."

She did not press, content to rest with her eyes hidden behind the cracked sunglasses.

Sunny felt strangely thoughtful after his conversation with Saint Tyris.

He was not sure that he agreed with her uncompromising views, but there was one thing Sky Tide had said that was unquestionably true.

Life was, indeed, unpredictable.

Take his own relationship with the steely Saint… Sunny did not know Saint Tyris very well, or share any of her principles, but he found himself respecting the stern Transcendent a great deal. He liked Master Roan, too. The three of them even shared some history.

Several years ago, Sunny had held nothing but contempt toward Legacies. He had regarded them as arrogant, dangerous, and hateful people, someone who did not deserve the unfair privileges bestowed upon them by nothing except for birthright. Who would have thought that he would come to value and admire some of them, one day?

Take Cassie, too…

When she surrendered his secret to Nephis on the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had thought that it was the darkest moment of his life. And yet, if she had not made that choice, he would have stayed behind a Sleeper. Sunny had no way of knowing if he would have survived the same journey Changing Star had.

What he did know, though, was that Rain would have been dead if not for his return. If Sunny had not been there to hold back the tide of Nightmare Creature advancing on her school, his sister would have been ripped apart by the rampaging abominations.

There were too many instances like that to count.

...Life was unpredictable, and no one could predict the twists and turns of fate… except for Weaver, perhaps. Even oracles like Cassie could only see glimpses of it, blind to the context and powerless to change the outcome.

So where did it leave him?

'The same place where I started, I guess.'

An ignorant fool struggling against something he could not even comprehend.

Antarctica, at least, was terribly straightforward…

With a sigh, Sunny moved strands of hair away from his eyes and sat down near Winter and Dale. His hands were aching for a simple fight.

"How much more do we have to wait, dammit?"

Dale glanced at him with a smile so faint that it was almost nonexistent.

"Rest while you can. You'll be regretting that this calm did not last longer, very soon."

Sunny grimaced and looked away, staring at a squad of soldiers that marched by. The soldiers were acting a bit strange, sticking painstakingly to the better illuminated parts of the battlement and hastening their steps in the darker areas. Their faces were glum and nervous.

He frowned.

"What's up with them?"

Winter turned her head slightly, studying the soldiers.

"Huh? Haven't you heard the rumors?"

Sunny thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"What rumors?"

The Ascended archer chuckled.

"You should really come out of your APC more often, you know? Well, anyway… there are a lot of scary stories spreading among the refugees these days, one more nonsensical than the other. The latest story is that there is a shadow wraith stalking the city, hiding somewhere in the darkness. Apparently, it lures people away from light, never to be seen again."

She took a deep breath and then added in a more somber tone:

"...Although, maybe there's some truth to that one. Soldiers are not usually easily spooked, but as you can see, they are on edge. Too many disappearances lately."

Sunny frowned. In a city of two hundred million, there were bound to be some disappearances… especially with the Nightmare Spell infecting people left and right. However, he felt concerned. A shadow wraith… that was right up his alley, no?

There could also be a different explanation for the increased number

of disappearances. The Terror of LO49 was known to start its meals in just that manner.

In any case, he sensed some unease.

"A shadow creature… I don't know. They're extremely rare. I only ever met one in the wild, and even that was inside a Nighthmare. I'm not sure if any survive to this day."

Well, there was that one little bastard who got a chunk of his flesh. Did Scavengers need to devour a corpse to inherit new abilities, or would any piece of flesh suffice? What were the chances of the vile gremlin developing an affinity to shadows?

Dale simply shrugged.

"If there is something strange going on, Army Command should already be investigating. Since we weren't officially informed, either the rumors are baseless, or the incidents are not serious enough to inform the Irregulars. Regardless, we should concentrate on the task at hand."

As if on cue, there was the sound of light steps, and Master Jet approached from further along the wall. The members of her cohort — now fewer than before — followed.

She looked around briefly, then said:

"I've just received the word. Roan and his people are approaching. The Devouring Cloud is in a frenzy… don't know what they did, but it worked. Prepare yourself."

The rest of the defending force seemed to have received the same news. All along the southern stretch of the wall, a flurry of activity commenced. Soldiers were checking their weapons for the last time, Awakened were summoning their Memories, rail gun crews were hurriedly finishing maintenance procedures and dragging crates of tungsten rounds closer to the feeding mechanisms.

Thousands of turrets came alive, turning their twin barrels toward the sky.

Sunny stood up and stretched, breathing in the cold winter air.

Looking at the members of his cohort, he grinned.

"Same deal as the last time. Hopefully, no Ga… actually, never mind. I'm not saying it aloud. Just do well, and don't die."

Chapter-1007: The Fall of Falcon Scott (25)

Pretty soon, the distant horizon turned hazy with a myriad of flying horrors. The scene was eerily familiar — the only difference from their last attempt to destroy the Devouring Cloud was that, today, the landscape was illuminated by pale moonlight.

And that there were a few less Irregulars standing watch on the wall.

Sunny silently observed Winter, who was preparing to unleash hell. Once again, she was surrounded by several mysterious Memories, and once again, a group of Awakened used their Aspects to augment her powers.

He stood some distance away in the company of Master Jet and Dale. None of the three were going to participate in the ranged barrage, conserving their power for the sortie to hunt down and kill the Tyrant. The atmosphere was tense, but not as oppressive as the first battle against the harrowing swarm.

On the alloy battlement in front of them, a man in leather armor was sitting with his eyes closed, meditating. The falling snowflakes swirled in strange ways around him, as if following invisible paths.

He was one of Dale's Awakened, and someone of whom Sunny knew — the man possessed the Ability to open stable spatial rifts, and had been one of the candidates he had considered when assembling the cohort. Since no one knew where the Tyrant was going to fall after having its wings cut by Roan, the strike team would need to get around the perimeter of the wall fast.

…If Roan succeeded.

"Gods…"

Hearing Dale's quiet whisper, Sunny looked south and saw arcs of lightning dancing deep within the distant swarm. His face paled a little.

"They're... inside it?"

It seemed that Roan and the Awakened of the White Feather clan were leading the Devouring Cloud to the city with the smell of their own blood.

Suddenly, the task of slaying the Tyrant of the swarm seemed even heavier than before.

'So what? Nothing changed…'

Sunny had some contingencies, at least. Saint and Nightmare were currently guarding one of the breaches in the wall. Should the three Masters prove inadequate, his Shadows would help them reach and kill the broodmother of the swarm… or was it a father?

'Who cares?'

Sunny clenched his fists and watched as the horde of flying horrors swiftly drew closer to Falcon Scott. Soon, the city defense systems opened fire once again, and so did Winter.

The mass of brood beasts obscured the sky, drowning out the light of the moon. In front of the swarm, a horde of Nightmare Creatures moved, seemingly as desperate to escape from it as humans would be. Caught between the Devouring Cloud and the wall of Falcon Scott, they launched themselves at the alloy barrier, dying in scores under the barrage of bullets and arrows.

Somehow, today's battle felt more frenzied, more dire. Shrieks and howls of abominations fused with human shouts, all disappearing into the rustle of countless leathery wings.

A dark expression appeared on Soul Reaper's face. Gripping her glaive, she said:

"Hold. Wait for the signal."

At the moment, everything depended on Roan and his Awakened. They had to lure the Tyrant forward and bring it to the ground, so that the three elite Ascended of the Irregular Company could sortie out, find it, and finish the creature off once and for all before it escaped.

Seconds passed, then minutes, but the promised signal was not coming.

Sunny felt his nerves reaching a breaking point when a swift shadow suddenly fell from the sky. It was not a brood beast, however — instead, it was a young Awakened woman wearing the white colors of her clan, her armor decorated with beautiful etchings of hawk feathers… and marred with blood.

Sunny remembered seeing her several times in the Sanctuary, back when Sky Tide had still ruled over the Chained Isles.

The young woman landed gracelessly on the battlement and staggered, barely keeping her balance. Then, she looked around, took a step toward Master Jet, and stumbled. Dale caught and supported her, his face grim.

Soul Reaper frowned.

"What happened to sending us a signal? Where's the Tyrant?"

The young woman gritted her teeth, and then said hoarsely, her voice full of ire:

"Two. There's two of them…"

It took a few seconds for her words to register. Sunny cursed and looked at the dark mass of the swarm that obscured the sky.

'Two Tyrants? How does it make any sense?!'

Jet's face twitched. She stared at the young woman for a moment, then asked evenly:

"So where are they?"

The Legacy leaned on Dale and turned slightly to face the Devouring Cloud.

"The… signal…"

As if answering her words, two radiant spheres of light suddenly appeared in the distance, tearing through the darkness. One deep within the swarm, across the killing field. The other, unexpectedly, was even further away, but in a different direction — to the west of the city, near the ocean. The Devouring Cloud had barely reached there.

Her job done, the young woman from the White Feather let out a sign and slumped, losing consciousness. Dale barked something, and one of his men — most likely the healer — took her off his hands.

The three Masters briefly glanced at each other.

Master Jet uttered a curse that would have made Sunny blush if the situation was slightly less dire, and then smiled darkly.

"I guess we are going to have to split up."

She looked between the distant spheres of light, then sighed and moved her shoulders, as if to loosen the muscles.

"I'll take the southern one. Sunny, Knight… you two go west and deal with the second Tyrant. Get it done."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then took a step forward.

"But…"

She raised a hand, stopping him.

"That's an order. No time to waste."

With that, Jet began summoning a Memory. Before the whirlwind of white sparks even manifested into reality, Soul Reaper was already moving, leaping over the parapet of the battlement to disappear into the haze of falling snow below.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

When he turned around, there was a shimmering portal in the air in front of him, leading to the point on the western wall not too distant from where the sphere of light still burned in the air. Dale was already heading toward it, his helmet weaving itself from light.

Sunny followed.

Before stepping into the spatial rift, however, he sent a mental command to Saint.

Not a few seconds after Soul Reaper landed on the ravaged ground beyond of the killing field, a dark rider leaped through the breach in the wall, and followed.

Chapter-1008: The Fall of Falcon Scott (26)

Stepping through the spatial rift felt no different from taking a mundane step. It was only a little bit disorienting — the sudden change of the landscape, the direction of the wind, the subtle shift in the tone of the firing armaments. For Sunny, it was especially so, because he could also feel that the shadows around him were entirely different.

However, there was no time to waste on being confused.

Forcing himself to focus, he followed Dale to the edge of the wall and peered down.

Far below, there was a stretch of land flooded by attacking abominations, with brood beasts swarming above them… and behind those, the edge of a tall cliff that descended toward the shore. The dark expanse of the ocean stretched for as far as the eye could see, moonlight dancing on its restless, black surface.

The sphere of light was slowly growing dimmer as it burned somewhere above and beyond the cliff.

Dale spoke, his voice sounding slightly muffled by the helmet:

"We will have to fight our way through."

Sunny nodded.

"I'll clear the way, you follow."

The Sin of Solace was already manifesting itself into his hand, and shadows were wrapped around his body, filling him with resilience and strength. The Marble Shell was augmented, as well.

Sunny lingered for a moment.

"What about when we reach the Tyrant? We can't allow it to escape, and with Master Jet gone…"

The stalwart Master shook his head.

"I'll trap it and us within the barrier. Then, either the Tyrant dies, or we do. No one will escape."

Sunny had already seen one of Dale's barriers — the one that allowed things to pass from within, but blocked everything coming from the outside. Today, he would see the second one, which functioned in reverse.

More than that, he was going to be trapped inside that barrier with a damned Fallen Tyrant. If they wanted to be sure of the result, there was no better way.

"Great. I'll be going, then. Come down in a few seconds."

Instead of summoning the Dark Wing, Sunny simply turned into a shadow, slid over the edge of the battlement, and swiftly glided down the surface of the wall. In a moment, he was already on the ground, emerging from the darkness with the jade jian whistling through the air.

By the time Dale landed behind him, using some sort of rope Memory, half a dozen abominations were already bleeding on the ground.

The defenders on that section of the wall had already received orders to support their sortie, as well, shifting their fire to help the Ascended create a corridor through the mass of Nightmare Creature. Granted, they were spread too thin between the Devouring Cloud and the abominations attacking the wall in a desperate attempt to escape from the swarm, so the results were modest.

At least Sunny did not have to worry about catching a tungsten round with his back.

'Goddamn… great…'

Sunny and Dale rushed forward, fighting their way through the tide of frenzied Nightmare Creatures. The stalwart Master used his heater shield and heavy flanged mace to crush and break the abominations, flinging their bodies out of the way. Sunny simply cut through them, rending the hideous body with the jade blade of the Sin of Solace.

However, there were just too many enemies to kill. Even if Dale's plate armor easily shrugged off blow after blow, and Sunny could simply ignore most of the attacks that got through his defenses, the weight of the horde threatened to push them back. More than that, they were constantly accosted by the brood beasts from above, making it much harder to remain alive.

For now, they had not met a creature powerful enough to be a lethal threat — which was a testament to how incredibly durable both Masters were... but it was only a matter of time.

Sunny growled, and then called upon the shadows.

Instantly, dark hands rose from the ground, grabbing the abominations and either throwing them aside, or outright tearing their bodies to pieces. Black chains whipped in the air, obliterating lunging brood beasts.

"If you have a good Memory or two, use them now!"

Dale bashed a leaping abomination with his shield, turning its body into bloody paste, and tore something off his belt.

In the next moment, there was a blinding flash, and then a sound akin to the roar of an angry dragon shook the world. Sunny smelled the carnage before he saw it. In front of them, a morbid path of charred corpses cut through the horde.

Dale pushed Sunny forward and lunged into the momentary rift in the mass of Nightmare Creatures.

"That one has to accumulate charges for a long time! We won't be able to use it against the Tyrant…"

Sunny snarled as he ran.

"We need to find the damned bastard first! Don't hold back!"

A few minutes of frenzied slaughter later, battered but alive, they reached the edge of the cliff and plunged down. Sunny had turned into a shadow once again, while Dale used an enchanted rope with a vicious hook tied to its end. The hook had been ruthlessly thrust into the flesh of an especially massive Nightmare Creature just a second before.

…Down on the stone beach, there were much fewer abominations. Some of them had already been cleaned to the bone by the brood beasts, while others were alive and full of murderous fury. Some distance away, Sunny could see the tall walls of the port fortress and the shapes of gargantuan ships resting on the waves.

As he looked around in search of their prey, something flew from the darkness, forcing him to jump aside. It turned out to be a massive chunk of bleeding flesh that had been the torso of a Nightmare Creature seemingly only moments ago.

Looking at where the chunk of flesh came from, Sunny witnessed a chilling sight.

Out there ahead of them, halfway to the dark water, a towering being being besieged by a mob of abominations. Six segmented legs, a tail with a long stinger, torn and broken leathery wings… and three terrifying circular maws swaying on the ends of long necks.

As he watched, one of the monstrosity's maws shot down, biting into the body of a powerful Nightmare Creature. With a violent twist, the creature came undone, rivers of blood and viscera spilling onto the cold stones. At the same time, the other two maws shredded a couple more abominations, swallowing large chunks of them whole.

The tail stinger shot forward with blinding speed, piercing another and pumping poison into its convulsing body.

Sunny looked at the macabre scene with dark resentment.

'...Be careful of what you wish for, I guess.'

They had found the Tyrant of the Devouring Cloud.

Chapter-1009: The Fall of Falcon Scott (27)

As Sunny watched, the Tyrant tore apart several more abominations, devouring their flesh with its three enormous maws. This creature… it was on par with the Lord of the Dead that Sunny had faced in the catacombs below the Dark City.

Back then, he was merely a Sleeper. Now, he was an Ascended himself, and an abnormally powerful one at that. His loyal Shadows were indisposed, but he was accompanied by Dale instead.

There was no reason for this fight to be too hard…

However, they had a big problem.

The more Nightmare Creatures the Tyrant killed and devoured, the more invigorated it seemed. The gruesome wounds on its wings were already healing, and very soon, the monstrosity would be able to take flight again.

Sunny could not allow that to happen.

Glancing at Dale with a somber expression, he said:

"It's now or never."

Above them, a swarm of brood beasts separated from the dark mass of the Devouring Cloud, rushing down to protect their ruler.

Dale nodded and silently lunged forward, closing in on the Tyrant to trap the creature — and the two of them with it — inside a barrier of shimmering energy. Sunny followed, cutting down several abominations that had tried to bar their passage.

However, the towering monstrosity seemed to have sensed the approaching threat, or maybe grew tired of the relentless attacks by the other Nightmare Creatures. It suddenly jumped, soaring high into the air, its broken wings raising a powerful gale.

The Tyrant had not managed to stay in the air for long, at least not yet, but it succeeded in creating some distance between itself and the pursuers. Then, moving with stunning speed, it turned in the direction of the port fortress… and ran.

Sunny's eyes narrowed.

'Damnation!'

It only took him a split second to make a decision and shout:

"I'll slow it down! Catch up as fast as you can and set up the barrier!"

With that, he left Dale behind and turned into a swift shadow. Flying with terrible speed across the stone beach, Sunny pursued the Tyrant. The creature barreled forward like a speeding train, its six legs turning countless stones into rubble and dust. Its wings were healing more and more…

Close enough from the port fortress to be seen from its walls, Sunny finally overtook the monstrosity and jumped out of the shadow right in front of it. The Sin of Solace flashed, severing one of the creature's limbs, and it toppled heavily to the ground.

He barely managed to dodge the massive body, but in the next moment, the Tyrant's stinger was already shooting through the air, aimed at his heart.

'Ah…'

Sunny blocked the terrifying jagged spike with the flat of the jade jian, at the same time turning his body as heavy as he could. The impact pushed him back, his feet leaving two grooves in the stones. The monstrosity struggled to stand up, but a dozen jet-black hands rose from the ground, grabbing and pressing it down.

Three long necks of the Tyrant twisted like snakes. Two maws bit

into the shadow hands, tearing them apart, while the third flew toward Sunny. Staring at the repulsive fleshy circle full of razor-sharp fangs, he shuddered and realized that the thing could swallow him whole.

Sunny shifted his weight and dashed aside, narrowly dodging the maw, then lashed out with the Sin of Solace. As a bloody wound appeared on the abomination's neck, a deafening wail slammed into him like a hammer.

The shadows he had manifested were all but gone, and the Tyrant was nowhere near being immobilized. Sunny could waste more essence creating shadow implements… maybe even encase the creature and himself in a large dome… but what he really needed to do was damage its wings.

Sadly, the monstrosity was fiercely determined to protect them. As soon as Sunny tried to get closer to the abomination's wings, its stinger, three maws, and five remaining legs all came after him. He scrambled to dodge the hurricane of attacks, dancing between them like a demented acrobat. Shards of stone and wet sand rose like a cloud into the air.

'Curse you…'

The Tyrant's movements were growing more frenzied and chaotic. Its mind was being assaulted by the [Sinister Whisper] of the cursed sword — the effect of the enchantment was going to persist, too, driving the monstrosity utterly mad.

…Funnily enough, the same erratic behavior seemed to be repeating in the skies above them, where a large portion of the Devouring Swarm seemed to have lost a lot of its unnatural cohesion.

They would only cease to be a threat to the city once both Tyrants were dead, though.

The massive abomination understood that there was something strange going on with its mind, as well. It tried to disengage and lowered itself to the ground, as if preparing to jump again… only this time its wings might have been healed enough to allow the Tyrant to

fly.

'No!'

Before it could escape, however, a dome of shimmering energy suddenly appeared around them. The Tyrant jumped, slammed into the roof of the dome, and plummeted back down.

The heavily armored figure of Dale slammed into its body, a flanged mace falling down to crush another of the creature's legs.

The three of them were now locked inside the barrier. The Tyrant would not be able to escape anymore…

However, the dome of energy was not particularly large. It barely encompassed the enormous body of the winged monstrosity and a few meters of the stone shore around it, leaving Sunny and Dale no room to maneuver.

It was like being locked in a tiny cage with a very angry, starving tiger.

If the tiger was the size of a small building, had three heads, and possessed the tail of a scorpion.

And had also been driven into rabid insanity by a whispering jade sword.

'Crap…'

The Tyrant wailed again, its screeching voice full of madness and fury.

Then, it rose from the ground, and all hell broke loose.

Chapter-1010: The Fall of Falcon Scott (28)

Trapped in the small bubble of the energy barrier, the Tyrant turned into a murderous hurricane. Moving with speed that was surprising for such a large creature, it thrashed and spun, trying to rip the hateful humans apart.

Sunny and Dale had managed to dodge or deflect the barrage of devastating attacks, for now, but avoiding being crushed by the sheer mass of the frenzied monstrosity was even harder. The barrier was just too small to move away, leaving them no choice but to try and straddle it.

That had not been a good choice… even on the Tyrant's back, the three maws and the stinger could attack them freely. More than that, the abomination instantly rolled on the ground, throwing them off.

Sunny barely avoided being buried under the mountain of flesh. Just a handful of seconds after Dale had erected the barrier, he felt the salty taste of blood on his tongue. Both Ascended were battered and wounded.

Of course, the Tyrant was not unscathed, either.

Three of its legs were gone, its body was covered with a multitude of deep cuts, and one of its necks was halfway to being severed. Better yet, the creature seemed to have surrendered to its most primal instincts, driven into madness by the Sin of Solace.

The bestial rage of the Tyrant was terrifying, but it would have been much more dangerous to fight the monstrosity if it had retained its inhuman intellect. A smart enemy was infinitely deadlier than a senseless one.

Now, all they had to do was put it down.

"Cut off its head!"

"I'm… trying…"

Dale's shield was wedged into one of the Tyrant's necks, and as Sunny yelled, he hammered its rim with his mace, as if driving a nail into wood. The heater shield sliced through the flesh of the abominations like a blade, causing a river of black blood to spill onto the stones.

Half-deafened by the creature's shriek, Sunny manifested a wall of shadow to defend Dale from one of the remaining two maws. The wall shattered under the monstrous assault, but by that time, the Ascended had hammered his shield one last time, and one of the Tyrant's heads flew off.

'Damn!'

After that, Sunny had to worry about himself. The wounded creature shifted, slamming him into the barrier with the towering bulk of its body. Bone Weave and Marble Shell saved him from being turned into bloody paste, but he was trapped, crushed, and unable to breathe. What's worse, there was no escape…

Well, for most people. Sunny simply dissipated into the shadow projected onto the creature's body by the shimmering barrier, and appeared on the other side of the abomination, his sword already falling to bite into the its side.

Just like that, the dire battle continued. Sunny and Dale were one mistake away from being severely injured or killed at every moment, but neither of them had made that mistake yet. As time went on, their enemy grew more and more frenetic, but the two Masters only grew more effective in their attempts to butcher it. They were learning how to better hurt it with every blow, dodge, and step.

Dale's armor cracked, but in return, the Tyrant's stinger was shattered by the heavy flanged mace. Sunny was now bleeding from a deep cut above his left eye, but in return, one of Tyrant's maws was missing half of its fangs.

Using a momentary opening created by the monstrosity throwing all of its weight against the barrier, Sunny finally managed to position himself for an all-out attack. He dashed forward, turning his body light to create momentum, and slashed the Sin of Solace across the base of one of the creature's necks.

The jade jian seemed to laugh as it sliced through the tough hide, steel muscles, and unbreakable bones of the Tyrant, emerging from the other side of its neck in a fountain of blood. The second of the three maws fell to the ground.

"One more!"

Dale received an earth-shattering blow on his shield and slid back with a low grunt. His hand trembled a little.

"The barrier won't hold for much longer. We must... hurry..."

Sunny did not need to be reminded. He already felt that the shadows surrounding them were changing — the shimmering energy was growing dimmer every time the Tyrant slammed into it. By now, most of its shine was already gone.

But the creature had lost most of its weapons, as well.

It was bleeding heavily, maimed and wounded, its speed gradually decreasing. Sunny knew not to let his guard down — these last moments were often the most deadly, both because human fighters tended to get overconfident when the victory neared, and because their enemies would often abandon all caution in one last desperate attempt to destroy the opposition and survive.

Still… this had to end quickly.

'Risky…'

The thought flashed through his mind, but Sunny was already moving. Pushing himself forward, he deflected a glancing blow from the creature's tail… and slammed into the Tyrant like a cannonball.

Thrown off balance, the monstrosity reeled, and then threw itself into a fierce retaliatory attack. Sunny managed to dodge its legs, but not

its maw. He simply slashed at it with the Sin of Solace, feeling the flesh part before the jade blade.

At the same time, the creature left itself completely open to Dale. The stalwart Master lunged forward, his mace suddenly igniting with a dangerous red glow. The moment it connected with the base of the Tyrant's last remaining neck, the flanged head of the mace exploded with ominous light, and something thundered.

Sunny saw the shape of the abomination's neck melting in the furious red light as it was torn apart.

Then, for a second, he could not think about anything anymore.

Moments before it died, the Tyrant managed to grab his shoulder with its maw and fling Sunny into the air. Feeling a pulse of tearing pain, he found himself flying backward away from the dying creature. His back connected with the weakened barrier… and shattered it, the Marble Shell turning rigid from the impact.

Sunny landed gracelessly a dozen meters away from the convulsing body of the Tyrant, rolled for a few meters more, and came to a stop at the edge of the water. A pained groan escaped from his lips.

'That… hurt…'

He slowly sat up and glanced at his shoulder. The leather pauldron of the Puppeteer's Shroud was pierced in several places, and there were deep scratches on his skin. The Tyrant's fangs, however, had not cut deep. The lacerations were shallow.

He took a shaky breath and looked up. High above, the Devouring Cloud seemed… aimless and lost. Without malevolent purpose guiding the swarm of brood beasts, they were being slowly obliterated by the city defenses.

Saint and Master Jet must have finished off their Tyrant, as well.

Sunny glanced at Dale, who seemed rather battered, but alive.

'We… won.'

By all accounts, he was supposed to feel jubilation and relief. Even though the battle was not over, the Irregulars had accomplished their task. Today, the First Army was going to celebrate a victory.

However, Sunny did not feel relieved.

Instead, he felt… cold. Very, very cold.

And frightened.

'What the hell is this feeling?'

Struggling against a deep sense of unease, Sunny shivered and turned to the black waves, his hand reaching for the hilt of the Sin of Solace.

Just as he did, the water parted, and something… someone… appeared from below it.

Sunny froze, staring with wide eyes. His face paled terribly.

There was a man walking out of the ocean, water streaming from his armor. He was tall, with a powerful build. His hair was dark, and his bloodless face… was empty, not a hint of emotion hiding in his hollow eyes.

Instead, there was something different in them. Something vast, alien, and terrifying.

The man slowly emerged from the water and took a steady step toward Sunny, towering above him like a hollow wraith. The empty gaze of his glassy eyes fell down.

Sunny's hand shook.

Stunned, he tried to crawl back and whispered in a faint, trembling voice:

"...V—Verne?"

Chapter-1011: The Fall of Falcon Scott (29)

For a moment or two, Sunny's mind was empty. He crawled back, looking up at the familiar figure towering above him.

Verne… it was Verne. There was no mistake.

…Or something wearing Verne's corpse, at least.

His shadow was much more vast and dreadful than a human's shadow was supposed to be.

The hollow gaze of the dead Master pursued Sunny, his face still and unmoving like a mask. Behind him, the dark waves stirred, and more figures rose from the water. Men, women… dozens of them, hundreds even. They marched forward like an army of the dead, silent and emotionless, their eyes drowning in darkness.

All their shadows were wrong.

The people of LO49 that Sunny had left to die. He recognized all of them, staring at the undulating surface of the ocean in horror.

'The… the Terror…'

Strangely, it was the contemptuous laugh of the cursed sword that shattered his paralysis.

"Look, Lost from Light… your sins have come to haunt you!"

Sunny shuddered, coming to his senses.

'What sins, you bastard? I did everything I could to save them!'

The insidious voice laughed again, then whispered, its hissing words

falling like drops of poison:

"Weakness is also a sin, you pitiful worm… it is the greatest sin of them all…"

Sunny snarled, then rose to his feet and froze for a split second, thinking feverishly about the situation.

After chasing the Tyrant, he was now behind the city. There were tall cliffs between the ocean and the northern wall of Falcon Scott, so nothing could escape the shore without being torn to shreds by the defensive armaments… granted, most of the First Army forces were currently concentrated on the southern side of the wall, fighting against the Devouring Cloud.

The port fortress was nearby, though, and defended by its own garrison. Bloodwave and the Awakened of the House of Night were also there, protecting the anchored ships and overseeing the loading of the refugees.

A thousand enthralled corpses were not going to put a dent in the defenses of the port. As for the Terror itself…

Just as that thought flashed through Sunny's mind, he saw something that made his blood run cold. There, behind the slowly advancing figures of the drowned residents of LO49, the black water seethed and boiled, releasing even more thralls. Nightmare Creatures… thousands of them… were rising from the waves, all moving with the same silent, harrowing dispassion.

He took an involuntary step back, then steeled himself and raised the Sin of Solace.

The Terror's thralls could not be allowed to reach the port. Hundreds of thousands of refugees were currently there, with even more already on the ships. Thankfully, the elevator platforms leading to Falcon Scott were empty, the evacuation stopped briefly on account of the Devouring Cloud.

The defenders of the city had also spotted the new threat. Powerful beams of light fell from above, illuminating the silent horde. A

moment later, a hail of bullets was supposed to tear into it…

But it didn't.

The spotlights moved on, as if not noticing anything. Instead of an obliterating barrage of heavy rounds, all that came were a few sporadic streams of rifle bullets.

The armaments on the wall of the port fortress were silent, too.

Sunny felt a chill run down his spine.

'The hex…'

He did not get a chance to finish the thought.

Verne suddenly disappeared, moving with much more speed than he had been capable of as a human. Sunny shifted, trying to deflect the incoming attack, but his reaction was too slow. A devastating blow sent him flying backwards, the breath knocked out of him entirely. He crashed to the ground and rolled, feeling cold numbness spreading through his chest.

'Curse it…'

He had been mistaken to assess the enemy's strength based on how powerful the thralls had been before falling prey to the Terror. Whatever the creature had done to them… had made them into… was much more dangerous than their former selves.

"You are a forgetful fool, aren't you?"

Struggling to inhale, Sunny gritted his teeth. Indeed, he was… he had already known that the hexed people were capable of showing unnatural strength. Why would the thralls be different? If anything, their change would be greater.

One Master, a hundred or so Awakened, close to a thousand mundane soldiers, several hundreds of civilians… and thousands upon thousands of Nightmare Creatures, all controlled and transformed by the Terror.

With everyone seemingly blind to their existence.

The situation was not good…

Feeling true fear for the first time in a long while, Sunny forced himself to rise once again and look at the hollow-eyed horde.

'No, not everyone…'

Although most of the defenders seemed to be ignoring the Terror's thralls, some were still firing their rifles. That meant that the creature's hex was not absolute. With so many people around, it could only do so much.

There was a limit to its power. Which meant that it could be defeated.

There was a sound of metal scraping against stone behind him. Looking back, Sunny saw Dale approaching, his shield raised and dripping with blood. His heart skipped a beat.

"Dale! Do you see them?!"

The heavily armored Master turned his head slightly, darkness nestled in the slit of his visor. His voice sounded a little muffled:

"What are you talking about?"

Sunny's heart fell, but then, Dale continued:

"How would I miss thousands of creatures crawling from the ocean? Of course, I see them. Question is, why are the wall armaments still silent?"

More and more Nightmare Creatures emerged from the water, flooding the shore. Sunny found Verne and shivered, noticing that the dead Master was staring at him, as well.

"It's the Terror of LO49! The wretched thing is messing with people's minds! We need to…"

The hollow horde suddenly stopped moving. Thousands of heads

turned in unison, countless empty eyes all staring at a single point…

Sunny.

He shivered.

'...I guess it recognized me, as well.'

The horde rushed forward.

Chapter-1012: The Fall of Falcon Scott (30)

Across the city to the south, the majority of the First Army forces were fighting the Devouring Cloud. Even directionless, the gluttonous swarm still posed an existential threat to Falcon Scott — the sky was torn asunder by fire and explosions, countless brood beasts melting in that inferno as they threw themselves against the siege capital's defenses.

Somewhere further south, far away, Sky Tide was once again engaged in a dreadful battle against the Corrupted Titan, Winter Beast.

And yet, here, on the shore of the dark ocean, a new threat appeared… one that was perhaps no less dangerous than the Devouring Cloud.

Worst of all, no one except for two Masters and a handful of disparate soldiers seemed to be aware of it.

…Or so Sunny had thought.

The moment the hollow horde surged forward, the port fortress finally came alive. Numerous turrets turned their barrels, unleashing an onslaught of bullets at the thralls of the Terror of the Depths. Bright beams of light once again shone on the shore, and several rail guns thundered, cutting rifts through the horde. Arrows and magical projectiles fell down like rain.

The thralls had turned out to be too powerful to be obliterated by the sudden assault, but they did slow down for a moment.

'Finally, some luck…'

Sunny prepared to launch himself into the mass of enemies, but Dale

suddenly pulled him back.

"What… the hell… are you doing?"

The stalwart Master glanced at him calmly, then shook his head.

"There's no time for that. The real enemy is the Terror, not its puppets. You need to go… find Bloodwave, or someone from the House of Night at least. They need to find the creature and destroy it, before it's too late."

Sunny blinked.

"What about you?"

Dale turned to the advancing horde, lingered for a moment, and shrugged.

"I'll stay and make sure that they do not breach the wall of the port."

There were a lot of words left unsaid, but they both understood the implication. Dale was best at stationary defense, while Sunny was swift and elusive. Their roles were decided for them by that simple reality, and there was nothing to discuss.

The heavily armored Master took a step forward, raising his shield and mace.

"Go, Sunless. Don't linger."

Sunny opened his mouth, then closed it without saying anything. Throwing one last glance at the figure of Verne, who was walking steadily through the hellish barrage of bullets without paying them any attention, he gritted his teeth and dove into the shadows.

Behind him, the first of the thralls was already lunging at Dale, hollow eyes shining with the reflected moonlight.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it…'

Swiftly gliding through the darkness, he soon reached the wall of the port fortress and scaled it, emerging from the shadows on the

battlements. Here, a chaotic flurry of activity was boiling, soldiers and Awakened feverishly sending rivers of bullets, arrows, and magic into the horde of thralls.

On the other side of the wall, Sunny could see a large crowd of terrified refugees filling a large courtyard below. They had come here to board one of the ships and escape the doomed siege, but got stuck in the middle of the battle instead.

Ignoring the grim sight, he ran across the battlement toward the citadel of the fortress. If he could not find what he sought there, he would proceed past the citadel toward the pier, and from there to the battleships, if need be. As Sunny ran, he looked around, hoping to see someone from the House of Night among the defenders.

He got lucky sooner than he had expected.

The wall of the port fortress had towers rising above it at set intervals, each serving as a bunker. As he passed through one of these bunkers, observing the complicated machinery of the rail gun housed within, he noticed a familiar figure standing near a targeting interface. Tall, handsome, with black hair that sometimes seemed inky blue…

"Naeve!"

Sunny dashed toward the Nightwalker, who looked up from the terminal with a surprised expression.

"Sunless? What are you…"

Sunny waved a hand, interrupting him.

"Long story. Are you free from the hex? Can you see the monsters?"

He realized something, then looked around with a bit of confusion.

"Actually, never mind. How are all of you able to see them?"

Naeve lingered for a moment.

"Nightwalkers like me possess a high affinity to guidance and

revelations. The ocean and its depths, too. So, many of us were able to see through the… hex? As for the rest of the garrison, they don't see anything. But they also don't need to, as long as someone provides them with the targeting data. Basically, they are shooting blindly in the direction where we point."

Sunny froze for a moment, admiring the effective crudeness of that simple solution. Then, his face darkened.

On the wall outside the bunker, one of the soldiers suddenly lowered his rifle, remained motionless for a moment, then took a step forward and jumped over the parapet of the battlement, disappearing into the cold water below without a sound. No one seemed to notice his absence.

"Where's Bloodwave?"

Naeve pointed north, toward the pier.

"Protecting the ships. Why?"

Sunny answered with urgency obvious in his voice:

"This battle can't be won unless the source of the hex is destroyed. The Terror of LO49… we need to find and kill it. Staying on the defensive will only allow that fiend to propagate its influence throughout the city, killing countless people and growing its army. The House of Night and your Saint are our best bet."

The Nightwalker stared at him for a few moments. His tired face paled a little.

"You want us to abandon the ships, dive into the ocean, and fight the Terror in its territory?"

Sunny simply nodded.

"Exactly! And I'll dive with you, too."

Naeve hesitated for a bit, then sighed.

"Well, alright. Follow me, then. I'll take you to see my uncle."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Wait, that's it? I… uh… I thought I would have to persuade you."

The Nightwalker gave him a strange look.

"I was persuaded the moment you said "this battle can't be won unless". That Terror is one of the priority targets, anyway. So… come. Let's hunt the bastard down…"

Chapter-1013: The Fall of Falcon Scott (31)

As Naeve and Sunny made their way across the wall of the port fortress, the battle grew louder behind them. Sounds of screams rose into the night sky, and the battlements beneath them shuddered. Ignoring all of it, they rushed forward.

As they ran, Naeve yelled:

"Have you ever fought in the water?!"

Sunny spared him a tense look, remembering the harrowing journey across the dark sea of the Forgotten Shore. The boat Nephis had built of demon bones did not survive till the end…

"Once!"

The Nightwalker let out a nervous laugh.

"How did it go?!"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"I'm alive, aren't I?!"

There was not much choice, anyway. Naeve was probably the only Ascended of the House of Night inside the fortress — the rest were protecting the battleships sailing across the strait. Bloodwave was going to need all the help he could get, so Sunny had to join the hunt for the dreadful Terror.

Plus, he wanted to. The abominable creature deserved to die, and especially so by his hand.

'Won't be easy, though…'

Sunny had a couple Memories that would help him perform well underwater, but he lacked the experience of fighting in the depths of the ocean. Worse than that, Shadow Step and Shadow Manifestation would be nearly useless there — a shadow needed a solid surface to exist, and those were hard to find where he was going.

Actually… Sunny was not sure how his Aspect would function underwater. Much more distressing was the fact that he did not know a lot about the Terror of LO49, and what the abomination was truly capable of. The fact that it relied on mind attacks and manipulation suggested a lack of physical might, but even then, such things were highly relative when it came to Corrupted creatures.

Really, he was not even sure that the Terror was of the Corrupted Rank.

'...What the hell am I doing here?'

The Sin of Solace laughed, forcing him to grimace.

It did not matter. Even disregarding the fact that he had a personal score to settle, the creature had to be destroyed to protect the city.

"But what are you doing risking your life to protect that city? It's not like you, Lost from Light…"

Sunny did not really know how to answer, but he refused to let the voice of the sword distract him from the task at hand.

They were already on the pier, moving swiftly to its end. Some distance away, two gargantuan battleships rested on the black waves. He looked around, not noticing the distinct figure of the enigmatic Saint anywhere.

"Where is Bloodwave? Is he aboard one of the ships?"

Naeve gave him a confused look as he took his midnight blue coat off. Beneath it was a black wetsuit, an armor Memory already weaving itself from sparks of light.

"What do you mean? He's in the water, of course. Below the ships."

Sunny blinked.

"Oh. Of course…"

He hesitated for a moment, then dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud. Left wearing nothing but his underwear, Sunny shivered in the wind — his pale skin was painted black by the shadows wrapping around his body, and his lean muscles seemed like they had been cut from matte obsidian. He sighed, then summoned three Memories.

First, a large and beautiful white pearl appeared in his hand. Sunny lingered for a moment, then placed it on his tongue and closed his mouth. The [Essence Pearl] would allow him to breathe and see clearly underwater.

Then, a piece of an icy blue crystal inlaid in a frame of dull metal appeared, hung around his neck on a black string — the [Memory of Ice]. Using two charms at once would consume essence faster, but Sunny had to protect himself from the lethal cold of the winter ocean. It was only possible to augment one at a time with the Underworld Armament trait of the Marble Shell, so he chose the blue crystal.

Lastly, a harness made of a fisherman's net wrapped around his torso — the [Nimble Catch].

With that, Sunny was more or less ready to dive into the water… at least physically. The only problem was that he needed both hands to swim, but that was easily remedied by fastening the Sin of Solace to the Nimble Catch — the harness was very handy in that regard.

With the jade blade strapped safely behind his back, Sunny walked over to the very edge of the pier and glanced at Naeve. The Nightwalker was already clad in a light armor that seemed to be made of black seaweed and nacrous shell.

A pale smile appeared on Naeve's face.

"Ready?"

Sunny stared at the tumultuous dark waves beneath them and shook his head.

Then, he jumped.

The ocean grasped him in a cold embrace a moment later. Sunny almost panicked, a deluge of unpleasant memories instantly surfacing in his mind, but then discovered that he could breathe normally despite being surrounded by water. That calmed him down a little.

The Essence Pearl had a strange effect. Sunny could breathe through his nose as if he was standing on solid ground, and there seemed to be an invisible barrier preventing the salty water from flowing up his nostrils. Additionally, the active enchantment of the charm allowed him to see clearly through the dark expanse of the ocean, as if he was wearing a diving mask.

He was also cold, but not terribly so. It seemed that the high elemental resistance of the Marble Shell, augmented by the shadows, was enough to protect him from freezing to death — adding the Memory of Ice on top of that turned out to be overkill. Sunny dismissed the blue crystal, relieved to save some essence.

'Not… not too bad.'

A moment later, Naeve plunged into the water beside him and swam nimbly forward and down. Sunny had learned how to swim during his Wilderness Survival lessons back at the Academy, and practiced it a few times on the Forgotten Shore… and yet, one glance at the scion of the House of Night made him feel embarrassed.

The Nightwalker moved through the water with great speed and ease, looking like some kind of graceful aquatic creature. It almost seemed as if he was more comfortable in the water than he had been on land.

…Maybe he was.

Sighing inwardly, Sunny followed. His movements might not have been as natural and graceful as Naeve's, but with the frightening strength of an Ascended Devil and the help of the Nimble Catch, he found himself more than capable of keeping up.

They dove deeper into the dark water, soon reaching the ships.

Sunny felt a tremendous shadow floating silently, below, a few

moments before he saw it…

There, in the darkness, a monstrous killer whale was waiting, watching them with giant blue eyes.

Chapter-1014: The Fall of Falcon Scott (32)

Sunny had seen Bloodwave in his bestial form once from afar, but up close, the Saint of Night was much more terrifying.

The creature he had transformed into looked somewhat like a killer whale, its hide black and white, the lines of its body smooth and predatory. However, it was much, much larger than any mundane beast had any right to be.

There was a patchwork of ugly scars covering its hide, and steel armor encasing its long fins, edges sharp like blades. Its enormous eyes glowed in the darkness of the ocean with blue light, full of willpower and intelligence.

Even knowing that the giant killer whale was actually a human, Sunny couldn't help but feel tense in front of the great predator.

Since the beginning of the siege of Falcon Scott, Bloodwave had rarely shown himself — he mostly remained underwater, protecting the anchored ships and fighting those Nightmare Creatures that would try to attack the city from the depths. Army Command did not dare leave the port fortress and the vulnerable vessels without a defender…

And yet, today, that was exactly what had to happen.

While Sunny stared at the mighty Saint, Naeve glided forward and then hovered in front of the killer whale's snout, keeping himself in place with barely noticeable movements of his arms and legs. The tall Master looked tiny beside the giant creature.

'Huh…'

Sunny realized that he did not know how to communicate with others underwater. He couldn't really speak, or even open his mouth — unless he wanted to lose the Essence Pearl and suffocate. There was probably a system of signs one could learn, but he had not done that in advance.

The world was silent.

Not, not quite… actually, the ocean was full of sounds. They were just strange and muffled, reverberating through his bones as if he was hearing them with his entire body. The noise of the battle above was like a low, all-encompassing, distant roar. Sunny knew that sound was supposed to propagate very far in the water, but had no tools to distinguish and interpret what he heard.

Nevertheless, the Nightwalkers seemed to possess some method of sharing information. A few moments after Naeve approached Bloodwave, the killer whale shifted slightly, staring into the depths of the ocean. His pupils narrowed.

Then, a strange thing happened. The eyes of the great predator remained clear and blue, but the water itself seemed suddenly tinted dark crimson around them. Sunny felt extremely uncomfortable, as if Blood Weave did not like what was happening at all.

Then, the sensation passed as swiftly as it had appeared, and the ocean was normal once again.

Naeve turned around and beckoned for him to come closer. Struggling against the instinctual fear of large predators, Sunny swam toward the monstrous killer whale. Once he got close, there was suddenly a familiar voice in his ears:

"My uncle agrees. We have to kill the Terror."

Sunny stared at the Nightwalker silently. Naeve tilted his head a little.

"Oh… you can't speak. Well, there's nothing to discuss, anyway — all the available information about the creature was already given to us by Tyris of White Feather. We can only attack the Terror and do our

best. How is your resistance against mind attacks?"

Sunny made a fist and raised his thumb… he doubted that any Master had better mental defenses than him. Plus, he was already inoculated against the Terror's hex.

The Nightwalker nodded.

"Good. Taking our Awakened into the depths would just mean giving the creature more puppets to control. The three of us will have to hunt alone. Once we discover the Terror, Bloodwave will lead the charge, while our task will be to support him… maybe we'll even survive, who knows. Are you ready?"

Sunny shrugged, which was an awkward thing to do underwater.

"Then follow me."

Naeve swam even closer to the great beast, gliding parallel to Bloodwave's back. Reaching the dorsal fin that stood tall like the mast of a ship, he grabbed onto a small depression in the armor encasing it, and gestured for Sunny to do the same.

'Great… I am going to ride a damned Saint into the depths of a damned ocean…'

Cursing his fate, Sunny followed the Nightwalker's example and latched himself to the killer whale's fin like some sort of hitchhiker fish. He could feel a vast, powerful heartbeat somewhere below him, and a mighty presence that was beyond all mundane senses.

Naeve's voice resounded once again in his ears:

"Don't let go. Well… unless you feel like the pressure is too great for you to handle. I don't know how deep the Terror hides, and how deep you can dive. Sorry, Sunless… you'll have to learn how to traverse the abyss fast, and on your own."

Before Sunny could think of an answer — even though he could not relay it — Bloodwave suddenly moved. His great body lunged forward with stunning speed, and a powerful current almost threw Sunny off the fin. He grabbed tighter to the steel armor, feeling how

strange it was, to be able to breathe freely despite the rushing water.

Naeve stretched a hand to support him, but then brought it back, seeing that there was no need.

'This is… this is…'

Riding a giant killer whale into the dark depths of the ocean was perhaps not the strangest journey Sunny had made, but it was definitely up there with the weirdest of them, especially considering that the whale was actually a Saint of the great clan Night. The whole situation would have been comically surreal, if it wasn't so dreadful.

A terrible enemy waited for them at the end of this journey.

Bloodwave journeyed away from the shore, submerging deeper and deeper into the watery abyss. The world around them was ruthlessly cold and absolutely lightless, eerily similar to the Sky Below of the Chained Isles… but much more frightening.

In fact, that was not the only similarity. The deeper they went, the more Sunny felt as if something was pressing down on him. It was as if a titanic slab of stone was weighing on his body, making it harder to move and breathe. The feeling was not dissimilar to the torturous force of the Crushing, and thinking of that analogy made him very, very uneasy.

The Crushing was capable of killing even Saints, after all.

He tried to control his breathing.

'No mundane ocean can kill a Saint. And in terms of sturdiness, I'm not that far from one…'

Down and down they went.

Chapter-1015: The Fall of Falcon Scott (33)

The deeper Bloodwave descended into the vast, boundless, dark abyss of the ocean, the more disturbed Sunny felt — and he had already been deeply uncomfortable before taking the plunge into the shallows. There was nothing but emptiness and oppressive darkness both above and below them, stretching endlessly into the unknown.

Even though Sunny could see through the water, unlike how it had been in the impenetrable darkness of the cursed sea of the Forgotten Shore, he was still distressed. The depths of the ocean were not a place meant for humans... they were its opposite. Coming here voluntarily was nothing but pure madness.

'I might have misunderstood the Nightwalkers. They are all lunatics…'

He shifted slightly and glanced at Naeve, who was holding tightly to the fin of the monstrous killer whale. The currents battered them, and the pressure was slowly growing unbearable. The scion of the House of Night was not exactly calm, but his unease was caused by the prospect of fighting a Corrupted Terror, not the watery abyss itself.

Strangely, Sunny feelings were reversed. The Terror of LO49 was a harrowing foe, indeed, but he had faced plenty of those. The ocean, on the other hand, was an alien, unfamiliar, and fundamentally hostile space. It was abysmal in the purest sense of the word.

Grimacing, Sunny pulled himself closer to Bloodwave's fin and waited.

He did not know what exact means the Saint was using to track the hidden Terror. There was some pattern to his movements, but Sunny

wasn't sure what it was. Sometimes, it felt as though the great predator was choosing the direction at random, but one thing remained constant — they were always moving deeper into the darkness.

Naeve had not spoken to him again, but there was also no reason to. Sunny briefly considered summoning the Extraordinary Rock to relay his thoughts, but then discarded that idea. He had nothing useful to say, and making too much noise could attract unwanted attention.

Who knew what horrors hid in the dark depths, beside the Terror?

At some point, he felt a coughing fit rising from somewhere in his lungs and nearly panicked. The last thing Sunny wanted was to drown because of the residual trauma caused by brushing against a Nightmare Gate. He gritted his teeth and concentrated on suppressing the cough, forgetting even his fear of the ocean in the process.

That was why he almost missed the moment when the Terror finally revealed itself.

...Hidden in the depths of the lightless abyss, an eerily beautiful creature floated in the vast and silent darkness.

Feeling a slight tremor run through the enormous body of the giant killer whale and hearing its booming heartbeat change pace, Sunny looked into the distance. He shivered.

From a distance, the Terror looked akin to a strange, ghostly flower… a lily, perhaps, or a white lotus. Its pallid petals flowed and danced slowly in the darkness, some stretching for hundreds of meters into the empty abyss, some swirling around the small nebulous shape hidden in their center.

The sight of it was both breathtakingly beautiful and deeply terrifying. The wide ribbons of white looked both like the petals of a flower… and like the long tentacles of an ethereal creature, too alien to be described with words.

When they got closer, however, Sunny discovered that they were neither petals nor pale flesh… instead, he thought that he was

looking at long stretches of white, flowing cloth. He did not know if he was right, or how it even made sense.

And that was not what Sunny was preoccupied with at the moment, either.

There were other shapes surrounding the ghostly white blossom, hundreds of them. Drowned bodies surrounded it like a morbid barrier — humans, Nightmare Creatures, and things he could not name. They floated silently around the Terror, unmoving, their empty eyes staring blindly into the darkness. Some had cloth petals wrapped around them like a burial shroud.

The eerie scene made him shudder. The otherworldly beauty of it all only made the visage more appalling. There was a powerful presence emanating from the mass of billowing white cloth… one of utter horror and malice.

Sunny felt that presence overwhelm him, making it impossible to look away from the Terror, but also unbearable to witness it. He felt mesmerized, frozen, and paralyzed.

…That feeling was broken by another presence, though. Suddenly, the darkness around them seemed to become tinted red, and he felt a deep fury rising from within him. Sunny recognized that fury as something that was not his own, but instead belonged to someone else…

Bloodwave.

The Saint of Night was incensed, and whatever fear they might have felt was washed away by the murderous rage of the great predator.

It almost seemed as though the cloth petals trembled slightly.

In the next moment, the hundreds of drowned creatures all came alive, their hollow eyes turning to stare at them. Sunny uttered a silent curse and freed the Sin of Solace from its makeshift scabbard with his free hand.

'Here we go, then…'

He felt Bloodwave's body move, and then a furious roar spread through the water like a fearless battle cry. The force of it was almost physical in nature, moving through the dark abyss like a devastating shockwave.

The monstrous killer whale surged forward, and with him, the ocean itself came alive. Powerful currents assaulted the pallid flower, throwing its ghastly defenders away. The crimson hue of the water became more apparent, and wherever it spread, Bloodwave seemed to gain even more speed, even more might.

At the same time, the cloth petals exploded with motion, unfurling like long limbs, grabbing the thralls, and throwing them forward.

By Sunny's side, Naeve glanced at him and outstretched a hand, a bone harpoon appearing in it. The Nightwalker smiled, indigo lights dancing in his eyes.

"It's time!"

With that, he pushed himself off the fin and shot forward with incredible speed.

A moment later, Bloodwave crashed into the moving barrier of hollow-eyed thralls.

Chapter-1016: The Fall of Falcon Scott (34)

The monstrous killer whale snapped its jaws, savaging several massive Nightmare Creatures at once. Clouds of blood and pulverized flesh escaped from his maw like a red tide.

Powerful currents of crimson water swirled around his massive body, ripping even more abominations apart. A dozen thralls were destroyed when the great predator rammed through them at dreadful speed.

Armored fins moved, slicing bodies like giant blades.

A split second later, Bloodwave shot past the barrier of flesh, leaving devastation in his wake. He continued forward, heading for the eerie flower of white cloth that was the Terror.

Naeve and Sunny were left behind, though. Their task was to deal with the thralls and prevent them from attacking the Saint from behind.

'How the hell… do I do this?'

Fighting underwater was not at all like fighting on land. At this depth, Sunny felt as though he was constantly being pressed down by an immeasurable weight, both from without and from within. His Ascended physique and augmented strength were enough to deal with it, but he still felt a strain considerable enough to demand adjustment.

It was a lot like fighting while under the effect of the Crushing.

More importantly, though, there was nothing to support him here. Usually, a fighter's might came from being grounded — without the

ground under Sunny's feet, his blows would lack power. They would also push him away with the same force that had been exerted on the enemy, making battle flow and positioning a nightmare.

So, he saw two ways to fight effectively — one was to grapple the enemy and use their own body as support, bringing combat to an extremely close range. He would be greatly disadvantaged in such a scenario due to the length of his blade. The other was to use acceleration and maneuvering to turn each of his attacks into a deadly charge.

Sunny had a sinking suspicion that he would have to utilize both approaches today.

Ahead of him, Naeve clashed with one of the thralls — his harpoon shot forward, piercing the creature's head. The Nightwalker pushed it through all the way, then let go of the shaft, grabbed it again near the head a moment later, and tore the spear free.

Then, Sunny had no more time to observe the Nightwalker, forced to concentrate on his own enemy.

A vaguely familiar abomination that resembled a grotesque mannequin of flesh lunged at him, its hollow eyes full of darkness. A menacing bone scythe cut down, threatening to split Sunny apart. He was somewhat certain that his skin would withstand the edge, but there was no point in taking the risk.

The Sin of Solace moved to intercept the strike, much slower than he was used to, but still viciously fast.

The jade blade easily cut through the scythe, breaking it, and then continued forward to sever the flesh mannequin from shoulder to thigh.

The Spell whispered into his ear, its voice unaffected by the heavy mass of water:

[You have slain a Fallen Monster…]

[Your shadow…]

With no time to listen to it, Sunny suppressed his revulsion and used the bleeding remains of the abomination to launch himself sideways. A moment later, a chitinous body barreled through the spot he had been occupying.

Five more were already closing in on him from five different directions.

Sunny took a deep breath.

'This… this is not too bad.'

The situation was dire, but not as hopeless as he had expected. The greatest threat — the Terror itself — was currently preoccupied with Bloodwave. The thralls, meanwhile, were numerous and much more powerful than they had the right to be. However, there was one factor working against them.

Most of the thralls were no more native to the dark abyss of the ocean than he was.

Their movements were purposeful, but a little bit awkward. Their initial assault was dreadful, but mostly because many had been launched forward by the long pieces of white cloth that swirled around and trailed behind the Terror, behaving like the tentacles of a giant monster. Now that their momentum was spent, the thralls were much slower and less maneuverable than Naeve.

And Sunny, too, thanks to the Nimble Catch. An Awakened would have been torn to pieces in an instant, but the two Masters found themselves at a certain advantage.

More than that, Sunny realized that his Aspect was not as useless underwater as he had thought. There were no shadows around him to manifest… but that was only because he could not compel living shadows to obey him. Of those, there were plenty — shadows required a surface to exist, and each thrall's body was a surface.

Each of the thralls possessed a shadow, which allowed Sunny to sense their movements even if he did not see them. It also allowed Sunny to use Shadow Step, as long as the abomination was large enough.

As five thralls lunged at him, Sunny swam forward, dodged the claws of an especially large Nightmare Creature… and dove into its shadow, appearing on top of the chitinous monstrosity that had missed him a few moments earlier.

The Sin of Solace plunged through the thick carapace, instantly killing the abomination.

[You have slain a Fallen Beast…]

[Your shadow…]

Sunny almost grinned.

'So many fragments…'

He pushed himself off the convulsing carcass, narrowly escaping the cloud of blood, and looked up just in time to see Naeve clashing with another thrall.

The bone harpoon once again struck first, beheading the hollow-eyed creature.

However, this time, the Nightwalker was a split second too late to dodge the incoming attack.

Even though the thrall had lost its head, the creature's tail still flew forward, carried by momentum and inertia. The long, vicious spike at the end of the tail struck Naeve square in the chest, easily piercing the nacreous shell armor and plunging deep into his body. Then, it emerged from his back.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'No…'

But then, something strange happened. The scion of the House of Night seemed to ignore the terrible wound… and in fact, there was no wound. Instead, it was as though Naeve's body had turned into liquid — the spike pierced that liquid and then flew out of the Master's side without leaving a trace. A second later, Naeve turned solid once again, already attacking the next thrall.

His movements were swift, graceful, and flowing.

Sunny tore his gaze away and lashed out with the Sin of Solace to deflect a blow from a hollow-eyes thrall.

'...Neat.'

Behind them, Bloodwave had finally reached the beautiful, harrowing white blossom.

Chapter-1017: The Fall of Falcon Scott (35)

The monstrous killer whale cut through the crimson darkness, descending upon the ethereal blossom of flowing white cloth. His mouth opened, revealing a palisade of terrifying fangs. His blue eyes had turned deep red, glowing like spotlights and full of murderous intent.

As the great predator approached, the pallid flower exploded with movement. The shorter petals swirled, creating a barrier of white cloth around the small, unclear shape hidden in their center. The longer ones, which had been drifting gracefully on the currents, suddenly contracted and shot forward like tentacles.

Bloodwave roared.

Powerful currents surrounding his body churned, surging forward to meet the petals. He dodged nimbly, continuing to move forward as his jaw closed on one of the white tentacles.

There was no blood, no torn flesh, and no crushed bone. It was as though the petal was indeed nothing but white silk, and damaging it was like cutting a piece of lifeless cloth.

Sunny did not see much of what happened after, because he had his own problems to worry about.

There were just too many thralls around him, all powerful enough to pose a serious threat. Even with most of them assaulting the port fortress somewhere far away and above, the Terror's drowned guard was enough to kill him and Naeve ten times over, if they were not careful enough.

'Damn it…'

Propelling himself forward through the dark water, Sunny collided with a hideous creature made of iron and bone. The Sin of Solace passed through the abomination's body, cleaving it apart. However, the next thrall was already upon him.

Two human hands wrapped around his throat, trying to rip it open with dreadful strength. Sunny's skin turned hard as stone and resisted the pale fingers, but he still found himself being strangled. Using shadow sense to perceive the shape of the enemy, Sunny slashed back with the jade sword, severing both of the arms.

Tearing the cold hands off, he twisted and kicked back, pushing himself and the thrall away from each other. His adversary was hindered and maimed, but not eliminated.

And more were already closing in.

'...This is not going to work.'

He was doing well, for now, but death was only one mistake away. Sunny relied on his superior speed and maneuverability to slay the thralls, which meant that the moment he was immobilized or stalled, the tables would be turned. He was not a stranger to fighting with everything on the line, but not in an environment as strange and unfamiliar as the depths of the ocean.

It was far easier to make a fatal mistake in a place the rules of which he did not know.

Sunny willed himself to swim forward, then hesitantly turned onto his back and looked in the direction where Naeve was battling a throng of abominations. The Nightwalker moved with ease and graceful precision, navigating the dark waters like a creature born in and for the depths.

He certainly knew the rules.

An idea slowly formed in Sunny's mind. He adjusted his battle strategy in order to always keep Naeve in his sight, earning a few shallow scrapes as a result.

Sunny was a talented fighter, possessing combat intelligence on par

with the best of the best. He had plenty of insight into the underlying laws of conflict, and much better than that, his mastery of Shadow Dance allowed him to read most of his opponents like an open book.

And that was exactly what he had been doing throughout this battle, like most of the battles of the Antarctica campaign. There were too many thralls around to truly grasp all of their patterns, but their rudimentary battle styles were also crude and unsophisticated. Sensing the movements of their shadows for a few moments was enough to gain a shallow, but sufficient level of understanding.

However… that approach might have been the wrong one, today.

So, instead of trying to shadow his enemies, Sunny concentrated his will on trying to shadow his ally. Naeve's battle style was much more complex, profound, and refined — in terms of scope and sophistication, it was up there with the most intricately designed combat arts Sunny had witnessed. As expected of a scion of a great clan.

That style was not something that he could learn in mere seconds, or even several minutes.

But even the few minor insights Sunny did gain were already enough to qualitatively change his performance.

'Huh… so that's how you do it…'

The lessons he learned from using Shadow Dance to study how the Nightwalker moved were not anything grand, but they were extremely valuable. What better teacher could there be than a man supposedly carrying the lineage of Storm God, the god of the depths?

It was all about how his body related to the water, and how the water related to his body. How to position himself to cut through it unimpeded, and how to use the mass of water for his advantage.

Shadow Dance, and the harsh training Sunny had put himself through to master its first steps, made both his mind and body extremely malleable and adaptable. That was why he was able to quickly put what he had just learned into practice.

Changing minute details of how he moved, which muscles he strained, and the timing of sending targeted impulses of essence to reinforce them, Sunny was suddenly able to navigate the dark abyss much more freely. He felt more… in control of his environment, now.

Working with it instead of against it to achieve his goals.

A massive Nightmare Creature lunged at him, its claws missing the target by a few centimeters — just as Sunny had planned. He cut into the abomination and at the same time circled around it, using the carcass to hide from the next enemy. A moment later, the second thrall was dead, too.

'Good...'

But then, there was even more Sunny could do by fusing his unique abilities with what he had learned from Naeve. Using the [Feather of Truth] to make himself lighter or heavier, he could float up or plummet deeper like a stone. Using Shadow Step, he could jump between the large abominations. He could even turn incorporeal and cling to their bodies as a shadow.

If he used all of this smartly… the ocean would not be as inhospitable.

In fact, it was even a little liberating. Being able to freely move in three dimensions instead of just two opened up all kinds of neat tricks he could pull… the only limit was his intellect, cunning, and imagination.

'Get ready, bastards…'

Brandishing the Sin of Solace, Sunny cut through the dark water to meet the attacking thralls. A pale smile appeared on his face.

Chapter-1018: The Fall of Falcon Scott (36)

Sunny and Naeve fought against the drowned guardians of the Terror, while Bloodwave assaulted the eerie flower of white cloth itself.

From what Sunny could see — and he rarely got the chance to glance in that direction, embroiled in a furious and lethally dangerous battle of his own — the Corrupted creature and the Saint were at an impasse of sorts.

The Terror did not seem to have a lot of physical power. His graceful petals possessed a harrowing strength, of course, but not enough to threaten the Transcendent in his bestial form. Not all Saint transformations were those of beasts, and out of the ones that were, not all possessed overwhelming physical might.

But Bloodwave certainly did.

The monstrous killer whale attacked again and again, and the pallid blossom avoided his teeth and fangs again and again. Its shorter petals danced, making the Terror glide away, moving in irrational and mesmerizing patterns. The sight of it was eerily beautiful.

Its longer petals, though — some of them hundreds of meters long — slithered through the crimson darkness like white tentacles, battering the great predator and trying to wrap themselves around his enormous body. Nevertheless, Bloodwave did not seem hindered.

A few of them were already torn apart, swathes of billowing white cloth drifting silently into the dark depths.

…Some distance away from the two clashing giants, Sunny and Naeve were feverishly battling the legion of hollow-eyed thralls. The

cold abyss was littered with blooming clouds of blood and sliced remnants that floated around them like a morbid veil. Almost a hundred abominations had already been slain, but twice as many still remained.

'Curse it…'

The Nightwalker was a good partner in this battle, perhaps even the best Sunny could have hoped for. And yet, he still missed his Shadows… granted, neither would have been of much help in the depths of the ocean. Stone knights were not exactly the best divers, and neither were horses, as far as he knew.

Sunny, meanwhile, had grown somewhat confident about fighting underwater. He had managed to learn a few things by observing Naeve, and understood how to deal with the unbearable pressure by borrowing from his experiences with the Crushing.

Everything was going well…

Sunny decapitated another thrall, then spun, bringing the Sin of Solace in front of him. A creature that had been hidden by a cloud of blood suddenly lunged forward, only to impale itself on the jade jian — he had sensed its shadow long before the abomination appeared in view.

His lungs were burning, which was a concerning thing when one was deep, deep below the surface of the ocean. However, Sunny knew that it was just a sign of physical exertion. The Essence Pearl was still supplying him with a steady stream of air to breathe, and although he felt tired, that tiredness was nowhere near being debilitating.

With every kill they made, the number of thralls attacking Sunny and Naeve diminished. They had already survived the assault of the full three hundred, so fighting against the remaining two was much more manageable, and it would only grow more manageable soon.

'So why do I feel so uneasy?'

Sunny shivered, allowing himself to drift down for a brief moment.

Indeed, despite the fact that they seemed to be prevailing, his heart

was growing heavier with each kill. It did not make any logical sense, but nevertheless, Sunny's intuition seemed to be telling him that he was missing something.

But what?

There was not much time to think between the clashes with the abominable thralls, mostly because Sunny had to spend that time observing the dark waters around him and frantically calculating how and where to move in order to survive, as well as put himself in position for the next attack.

And yet, the longer the battle went on, the more it felt as though something was not right.

'What is it?'

He would have said that it was too easy, but it was not — fighting hundreds of menacing thralls underwater was one of the hardest and most demanding battles he had the misfortune of going through in the Southern Quadrant. Sunny was not only pushing his limits, he had ventured well past them, going so far as to learn an entirely new dimension of combat.

Even then, it was barely enough to keep him alive.

Perhaps… perhaps it was the fact that the Terror of LO49 had yet to launch a devastating mental assault on them, or pull some other diabolical trick.

Not that it was not already doing more than enough — in fact, the powers that the pallid blossom wielded were truly harrowing.

It was controlling thousands of thralls that laid siege to the port, spreading its hex through the garrison of the fortress and the First Army soldiers manning the northern section of the wall, puppeteering hundreds of abominations that sought to kill Sunny and Naeve, and fighting a powerful Saint… all at the same time.

It was just that Sunny had expected... something more. The bitter defeat he had suffered at LO49 left a mark on his heart. Although he did not want to admit it, the truth of the matter was that Sunny was

afraid of the Terror.

Was that fear irrational?

'The Marble Shell gives me high protection against mental attacks. It is currently an Ascended Attribute, one Rank below the Terror, but it is also augmented by my shadows. Bloodwave and Naeve… I don't know what tools they have to defend their minds, but anyone from a great clan has to have a great arsenal of Memories at their disposal…'

Maybe the truth was just that simple — the three of them were too tough to be affected by the Terror's greatest weapon.

As he dispatched another thrall and briefly met Naeve, the two of them grasping hands to propel each other in different directions, the Sin of Solace sighed.

"Such a fool…"

Sunny grimaced, raising the jade jian to meet another enemy. He had grown accustomed to the cursed sword striking at all his deepest insecurities, the lack of education and intelligence — mostly emotional — being one of them.

However… why had the Sin of Solace spoken now?

'What was I thinking about?'

The three of them being highly resistant to the Terror's most powerful means of attack… and before that, about how many things the creature was doing at the same time, from fighting Bloodwave to controlling the assault on the port fortress.

He continued to slay one thrall after another, becoming more and more distracted by the feeling of impending doom. His intuition was almost screaming now.

'I don't get it… I don't get it, damn!'

Sunny tore through a group of abominations, gritting his teeth. Luckily, there were much fewer of them left, so he had some space to think. Because of that, a random thought found its way into his mind.

'I wonder how Dale is doing…'

Then, he froze, which almost cost him an eye.

Dale, and the other defenders of Falcon Scott, must have obliterated a lot of the thralls on the shore by now.

And here in the depths of the ocean, Sunny and Naeve had killed their share, as well.

And the Terror… which had been spread thin, controlling all of them… was freed from the burden of commanding the thralls. With each of its puppets the humans destroyed, the creature was gaining back the ability to concentrate all its powers into a single point.

Suddenly chilled to the bone, Sunny turned around to see the battle between the Terror and the Saint.

But he was a few moments too late.

Chapter-1019: The Fall of Falcon Scott (37)

Some distance away, the ethereal flower suddenly swirled, its beautiful petals billowing outward like a current of white silk. Ghostly tentacles of flowing cloth shot toward the charging Saint, too swift and insidious to dodge.

As Sunny watched in fear, Bloodwave's head became enveloped by the silk, his glowing eyes disappearing from view. The body of the monstrous killer whale shuddered, moved weakly, and then grew strangely still.

'Gods…'

He saw something much more frightening, as well.

Two of the longer petals were already flying through the dark abyss, approaching Sunny and Naeve. They were fast... too fast. Inescapable.

He had no time to dodge, or even react. There were no thralls close enough to hide in their shadow, and not enough time to try and swim away. All Sunny managed to do was slash forward with the Sin of Solace. The jade blade met the white petal, cutting through the cloth. A small piece of it drifted away, but the petal was not slowed down at all.

It seemed to unfurl into a vast expanse of billowing silk, surrounding Sunny from all sides. Then, he was wrapped in the cold whiteness, encompassed and immobilized by it. The feeling of smooth satin brushing against his naked skin made Sunny shudder.

'Damna… tion…'

Then, the world grew still.

The dark abyss of the ocean disappeared, replaced by an eternity of fluttering white cloth.

His exhaustion and fear disappeared, too.

His memory, foresight, awareness, intent, and resolve were gone.

His mind was empty.

Sunny vaguely remembered having thoughts, desires, and hopes. But those words seemed senseless now, their meaning unfathomable. In fact, the word he had used to describe himself — Sunny — was meaningless, too. What a strange one it was…

Surrounded by billowing silk, he sensed movement. There were… shadows… moving around him. He was moving, too, being drawn closer to the largest one.

With each passing moment, his sense of self was dissolving more and more. Soon, it would be gone completely. And then, something new, something old, something darker, something… waiting… was going to take its place.

He felt at peace with that.

He felt... empty.

The emptiness was comforting.

There was just one thing blemishing the peaceful white flawlessness of the empty satin world.

…A sinister, mocking voice. It whispered into his ear, gloating:

"Here we go. A pathetic end for a pathetic fool."

Spurred by the hateful voice — his own voice — Sunny suddenly remembered.

Lost from Light.

That was his name.

That one memory unlocked all the rest like a key.

'What… is… going on?'

He struggled against the white cloth enveloping his body, but it was hopeless. The terrifying understanding flooded his mind, making him remember what had happened, and what was happening.

What was probably about to happen.

Sunny's consciousness was strangely split, one part of it sensing the reality of being dragged through the mass of water by one of the Terror's petals, the other still lost in the endless expanse of billowing silk.

He could feel a boundless alien presence encroaching upon both, seeing through his eyes, thinking his thoughts, and hungrily wanting for more. Its progress was slow and labored, but inevitable. Sunny tried to fight against the harrowing invader, throwing all of his willpower into a fierce assault, but it simply shattered against the vast, ancient, malevolent enormity of it like glass.

'Ah… not good…'

His thoughts were slowing down.

Suspecting that fighting the Terror in the mindscape was a futile endeavor, Sunny tried to free himself from the physical bonds instead. However, his arms were pressed tightly against his body, and the white cloth refused to part before the blade of the Sin of Solace, like the flesh of other Nightmare Creatures usually did.

He wasn't going to cut through it while only being able to move his wrist a tiny bit.

'Curse it!'

Sunny could vaguely sense the shadows of Naeve and Bloodwave some distance away from him. It seemed that he was the only one trying to struggle against the Terror's petals. Both were probably still mesmerized… why was he not, then?

The Sin of Solace and possessing a True Name might have helped, but it could not have been the only reason. Bloodwave was the enigmatic Saint's True Name, as well, and yet the monstrous killer whale was motionless, silently drifting on the currents in the dreadful embrace of white silk.

Which meant that this small degree of awareness was probably the result of Sunny's unreasonably high resistance to mental attacks. Even though he now shared his head with the Terror, a part of his mind was still fighting against it.

What good was it, though, since Sunny could neither free himself nor stop the creature from replacing his very self?

As he was drawn closer and closer to the beautiful blossom of white silk, he could feel himself growing… insubstantial. With each moment, his thoughts became less his own. His eyes stared at the silken veil, moving on their own. As if something else was looking through them.

Finally, Sunny felt true horror.

He had been scared before, but never like this. Sensing something else take possession of his body, while utterly helpless to resist the slow dissolution of his will… it was the realization of all his deepest, most guarded fears.

And it was being done by the Terror of LO49… the hateful, abominable creature that had already defeated him once.

Full of dark resentment, Sunny gritted his teeth, and summoned two Memories. That much he could still do, at least.

One was a small lantern cut out of obsidian.

The other was a fearsome mask of black lacquered wood, with vicious fangs and three sharp, twisting horns.

Weaver's Mask… Sunny had not called upon it in a long time. It frightened him, as well, almost as much as the Terror.

Trying not to think about what he was about to do, Sunny activated

the single enchantment of the Shadow Lantern, commanding it to devour all light around it.

There was no light to devour in the dark abyss, but that was not what he wanted. What he really wanted was for the divine Memory to gobble up as much of his essence as it could.

The Shadow Lantern burned through most of the essence Sunny had in the time it took the white tendril of silk to bring him to the pallid blossom. There was very little of it left, now…

Sunny felt like his mind was almost gone.

Struggling to wrestle control of his face from the terrifying presence, he forced himself to grin. He wanted that smile to be menacing, but all it ended up being was weak and scared.

'A pity…'

He sensed a vast shadow that was full of harrowing wrongness looming close, and thought:

'You wanted to see through my eyes? Well, then… look…'

With that, Sunny reached into Weaver's Mask and activated its second enchantment...

[Where is my eye?]

Chapter-1020: The Fall of Falcon Scott (38)

Sunny had never even thought about using that deadly enchantment after the first time. Back then, moments before falling into the Sky Below, he had activated it out of sheer desperation.

His gamble had paid off, but it almost cost him his life.

[Where is my eye?] allowed the wearer of the mask to gaze upon the tapestry of fate in all its harrowing glory. The endless, beautiful eternity of twisting threads transfixed all existence, stretching infinitely in every direction, as well as into the past, present, and future. It connected everyone and everything like an inconceivable, unknowable web.

Weaver might have been capable of witnessing the great tapestry… but mere mortals like Sunny were not.

A single moment of looking at fate had almost caused his mind to collapse. If his essence had not run out after that single moment, he would certainly have been killed, his head exploding in the most violent fashion. Luckily, he had gotten off easy by only experiencing unimaginable pain and pure agony, the memory of which still made him shudder.

…The Terror was very welcome to try doing the same.

As the last of Sunny's essence was disappearing, causing him to experience painful backlash, the inconceivable sight of the great tapestry of fate superimposed itself through and above the world. It was as stunning, breathtaking, and utterly overwhelming as he had remembered… however, funnily enough, Sunny saw the beautiful threads differently this time.

To him, they seemed like nothing but chains now.

Granted, he did not linger trying to look, only catching a small glimpse of the cosmic tapestry. Prepared for what was to come, Sunny used a little, but rather devious trick.

His consciousness was still split between reality and the illusion of the endless expanse of billowing white silk that the Terror had created to mesmerize its prey. So, Sunny made himself blind to the actual world, concentrating entirely on the illusory realm of pure whiteness.

That was why the Terror, who had almost stolen his body and was now looking upon the world through his eyes, was the only one to gaze upon the harrowing infinity.

Sunny felt the white silk enveloping him quiver, as if the pallid blossom was convulsing.

Even though his head was full of splitting pain because of that one short glimpse of the Strings of Fate, his weak smile finally turned into a real grin.

'...Look well, wretch!'

A split second later, his essence ran dry, and the deadly enchantment deactivated. The tapestry of fate disappeared, and Sunny suddenly found himself freed from the alien presence devouring his mind… or rather, it was still there, but now stunned and writhing in pain.

The physical binding of white silk that wrapped his body had come a little loose, as well.

Not wasting a single moment, Sunny used that slack to thrust his hand forward. The tip of the Sin of Solace pierced the wall of the cloth prison, and then moved upward, cutting a vertical rift in it.

A second later, he sliced the white petal open and burst into the dark water, incredibly happy to be in the oppressive embrace of the dark ocean once again.

Sunny hastily studied his surroundings, knowing that he did not have

much time.

Witnessing the tapestry of fate had not killed him as an Awakened Monster, so he doubted that it would kill a Corrupted Terror — if that was truly what the dreadful flower of silk was. In any case, the creature would most likely not stay stunned for too long.

Currently, the pallid blossom seemed to be seizing, its petals contorting in grotesque convulsions. The graceful harmony of their eerily beautiful dance had been broken, replaced instead by chaotic and jittery movements devoid of any logic.

The thralls appeared to be pained and disoriented, too.

Looking at the agony consuming the abominable creature, Sunny became even more convinced that fate was something that only gods were meant to see… or maybe no one at all. If even a Corrupted abomination of great and terrible power was reduced to a convulsing mess, what hope did mere humans have of withstanding the sight of eternity?

Shrugging off his own pain, Sunny glanced briefly at Naeve and Bloodwave. They seemed to be showing signs of life, but had not even begun trying to free themselves yet. Chances were, the Terror would come to its senses before they ever could.

He had to finish the battle himself.

Gripping the hilt of the Sin of Solace, Sunny propelled himself forward. He fought against the weakness that had been left behind by draining all of his essence, pushing his body through the water as fast as he could.

The Nimble Catch had turned into a useless piece of net, its active enchantment silent. Luckily, the enchantment of the Essence Pearl was a passive one, so he could still breathe.

His muscles and his lungs were burning by the time he reached the white flower. It had only been a dozen seconds or so, but the convulsions of the billowing petals were already growing weaker.

Feeling cold terror grasp his heart, Sunny gritted his teeth and dove

into the mass of white silk.

His goal was the small shape hidden in the center of the petals.

Swimming between the dancing swathes of white cloth, Sunny could not shake the feeling that he would be caught again at any moment. That his mind would be devoured, and his will would be replaced by something alien and vile.

Nevertheless, he pushed forward.

After an eternity of fear, he finally reached the heart of the pallid blossom.

And there, he saw…

Sunny froze for a moment.

In front of him was a shape wrapped in white silk. He could see the vague contours of a human body, desiccated and short in stature. It was feminine and small, almost delicate. Pressed tightly against the wrappings, a hint of a face could be discerned… two hollow pits where eyes should have been, and a larger one of a mouth that seemed to be open in a silent, eternal scream.

A cold understanding suddenly dawned on him. Looking at the expanse of white cloth extending from the wrapped body, he realized that what he had thought to be a flower was not a flower at all… it was simply a great burial shroud of white silk, its sleeves and draping drifting in the cold dark water.

Sunny lingered only for a split second, then grabbed onto the desiccated body, coming face to face with it, and drove his sword through its heart.

A strange, sorrowful sensation overwhelmed him for a moment.

Then, the white cloth around Sunny suddenly exploded with frenetic motion, and soon grew still.

In the silence that followed, the Spell whispered solemnly into his ear:

[You have slain a Corrupted Terror…]

Chapter-1021: The Fall of Falcon Scott (39)

The voice of the Spell resounded in the boundless darkness of the ocean, making Sunny shudder.

[You have slain a Corrupted Terror, Sybil of the Fallen Grace.]

[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

As the veiled body drifted down, wreathed in billowing white silk, one last whisper brushed against his ears:

[You have received a Memory.]

The Terror was falling down, deeper and deeper into the cold abyss. Sunny spared one last glance at the pallid blossom of the great burial shroud, knowing that it would be consumed forever by the dark depths soon. Then, he turned away and tiredly pushed himself in the opposite direction.

Sunny… was not in great shape.

His mind was slowly recovering from the dreadful mental assault, but his head was in the throes of a splitting headache thanks to catching the smallest glimpse of the tapestry of fate. His body felt weak and feverish, still suffering from the backlash of draining all of his essence.

There were the remnants of the trauma caused by touching a Nightmare Gate, as well. Sunny felt like he was about to cough his lungs out. Holding it back was not an easy task…

And yet, a hint of dark, somber glee still managed to overcome the cold numbness that encompassed his battered mind.

'...I did it. I killed that vile thing.'

In the end, he ended the Terror with his own hands. The stain of their disastrous first meeting had not been erased, but his failure at LO49 was… vindicated, now. Somewhat.

Or rather, it would be if he managed to return to the surface alive.

...Which, looking at the dark expanse of the ocean around him, Sunny was not sure that he would be able to do.

'Curses.'

The Terror… Sybil of the Fallen Grace… was dead and drifting lifelessly into the lightless depths. However, its thralls had not perished with their master. They seemed directionless and sapped of power, but there were still almost a hundred of them left.

In his current state, and especially without the active enchantment of the Nimble Catch, Sunny did not count his chances against the creatures as high. A dark grimace contorted his pale face.

'Essence! I need essence…'

Even knowing that it would not be enough, Sunny dismissed Weaver's Mask and the Shadow Lantern. A tiny stream of essence fell into the arid desert of his drained soul, and was instantly consumed by his body. The feeling of weakness diminished a little, but not nearly enough to change the situation.

The thralls were already coming to their senses, their hollow eyes peering through the mass of dark water at Sunny, Bloodwave, and Naeve. Some had begun moving in their direction, full of murderous intent.

'Bloodwave and Naeve?'

Sunny glanced at his companions, hoping against all hope to see them up and about.

Naeve was still stunned, drifting listlessly on the currents.

The Saint, however…

As Sunny watched, the monstrous killer whale flinched, then jerked his head sideways. The span of white cloth still wrapped around it slid off, revealing the great beast's glowing blue eyes. For a moment, they seemed disoriented, but then sharp intelligence shone through the fog of confusion, obliterating it.

An indignant growl escaped from Bloodwave's mouth as he gazed at the drowning remains of the Terror and the approaching swarm of the liberated thralls.

The Saint lingered for a moment, then moved his giant body and shielded Sunny from the enemies with its bulky mass. The enormous jaws snapped, pulverizing the fastest of the approaching Nightmare Creatures. Then, the killer whale surged forward to meet the rest of them.

In the next couple of minutes, a one-sided massacre took place in the dark depths.

Sunny realized in the first few seconds that his participation wasn't required. Instead of getting in the way, he swam closer to Naeve, grabbed him, and dragged both of them further away from the boiling battlefield.

"S—sunless?"

The Nightwalker's voice sounded weak in his mind, but he was conscious, at least. Sunny nodded, then turned the two of them so that Naeve could see his uncle obliterating the thralls.

After a few seconds of silence, he heard the Nightwalker's voice again.

"What… about… the Terror?"

Sunny thought for a moment, then dragged his finger across his throat.

"Ah… good…"

The two of them watched silently as Bloodwave tore the hundred abominations to shreds. Watching a Saint in action was a… sobering experience, to say the least. Sunny shuddered at the thought of having to battle someone like that directly.

And yet… the Terror of LO49 had dealt with the fearsome Transcendent, only to end up being dealt with by Sunny. So…

'Don't get a big head now.'

Sunny was all but certain that Mordret had already killed a Saint. However, knowing how diabolical that fiend was, that clash might not have been a direct battle, either.

…On the other hand, Sunny could easily imagine the Prince of Nothing doing exactly that and crushing a Transcendent in a straightforward fight, somehow, in order to terrify the rest of his enemies and break their wills.

Would Sunny be able to do the same?

'I have no reason to find out.'

He had no desire to kill Saints. If anything, Sunny wanted to have more of them around… the more, the merrier. The position of the First Army in Eastern Antarctica was much better than here, in this godforsaken hell, and the Second Army was already on its way. However, the Chain of Nightmares was far from being over.

Who knew what would happen in the coming months?

…It had taken Bloodwave no more than two minutes to annihilate the thralls. Sunny had thought that the Saint would rest for a bit after having to fight a Corrupted Terror and its minions, but the great predator did not waste any time.

Returning to where Sunny and Naeve were floating, he studied the two Masters with one of his giant glowing eyes, then shifted slightly. The tall fin that they had ridden into the depths was now right in front of them.

Sunny helped Naeve find a handhold, then tiredly clutched the steel

armor himself.

'Time to go back…'

The pallid shape of the slain Terror had long ago disappeared from view, devoured by the lightless depths. The mangled corpses of the thralls still drifted around them, slowly being carried away by the currents.

Ignoring them, the giant killer whale bellowed and surged forward…

This time, he was moving up.

Chapter-1022: The Fall of Falcon Scott (40)

On the way back, Sunny couldn't help but retreat inside himself. He did not know what was happening on the surface — whether the port fortress still stood, whether the Devouring Cloud had breached the walls of the city. The very idea of a world outside of the cold, dark, muted, oppressive abyss of the ocean seemed strange and distant.

Chances were, he would have to fight again as soon as Bloodwave delivered them under the walls of Falcon Scott.

However, Sunny was too tired, both physically and mentally, to care. He just wanted to forget about everything and rest, at least for a short while.

Luckily, the killer whale seemed to be moving much slower as they ascended from the depths. That, most likely, was done for the benefit of Sunny and Naeve — even though they were Masters, they were still fundamentally humans. Neither would have died from the decompression sickness, but it could do a lot of damage to their already strained and battered bodies.

Actually, Sunny was not sure if he was even susceptible to the bends, considering how strange and tenacious his blood was. However, he welcomed the short moment of respite.

Somber and unchanging, the dark ocean remained the same as they retreated from its cold depths. The only difference Sunny could feel was the slow, gradual lessening of the pressure that weighed on him like a slab of stone. With each minute, his body seemed to become a little lighter, and breathing was a little easier.

He closed his eyes, allowing the cold currents to carry him.

'...Right. There was a Memory. I should… probably… study it before we return to the battlefield.'

Sunny was in no shape to fight, but he might have no choice but to join the battle soon. He had to use any advantage there was.

He summoned the runes and watched as they shimmered in the darkness, slowly forming into coherent shapes. Before turning his attention to the Memories, he briefly checked the list of Shadows. Both Saint and Nightmare seemed to be alive. Relieved, Sunny let out a mental sigh and looked up.

A new set of runes appeared at the end of the list of his Memories.

Memory: [Shroud of Graceless Dusk].

He lingered for a moment.

'Huh.'

That was the second Memory in his arsenal named after a burial garb. Was the Spell trying to insinuate something?

Too apathetic to care, Sunny shrugged and continued to read.

Memory Rank: Transcendent.

Memory Tier: VI.

Memory Type: Armor.

He closed his eyes again, for a moment.

A Transcendent Memory of the Sixth Tier was the strongest he had ever received after slaying an enemy… of course, it was, since Sybil of the Fallen Grace was the strongest enemy he had ever slain. There was the Spawn of the Vile Thieving Bird, as well, but Sunny did not really consider that victory a true, honestly earned kill.

In any case, the Shroud of Graceless Dusk had to be an extremely potent Memory. And it was an armor, too — something that he desperately lacked at the moment.

'Lucky.'

Somewhat encouraged, he opened his eyes and looked back at the runes.

Memory Description: [Sybils were the heralds of the gods and conduits of divine grace. Many mysteries were known to them, and so were many truths. There was one being, though, who knew much more — the graceless caitiff, Demon of Dread. He knew every truth there was, because he knew everyone's fear… even that of the gods.

And so, seeking salvation from the end, the sybils abandoned the mortal realm and guided their people on a long and arduous journey. They led them far away, across the lands consumed by war…

To the Tomb of Ariel.

There, they found solace, safety, and shelter. In time, the voices of the gods grew silent one after another, leaving behind only a vast and dreadful silence. That was how the sybils embraced the Estuary, and that was how they fell.]

Sunny frowned.

'That guy again…'

By now, he was all but certain that the region of the Dream Realm where the Chain of Nightmares had originated — and the black pyramid hidden within — had something to do with Ariel, the Demon of Dread. Was the pyramid really his tomb, then? How would a daemon die, and who would build him an opulent grave?

And what did the great river that allegedly flowed back in time have to do with any of that? Its estuary was mentioned in the description of the Stifled Scream as a place where a dreadful secret had been hidden. Was this the same estuary?

The sybils had been, apparently, some sort of oracles that received revelations from the gods. Once the gods died, those revelations obviously stopped. The timing didn't really make sense, though, because the Tomb of Ariel had seemingly existed long before that.

'Mysterious…'

With a tired sigh, Sunny tried to ignore the myriad of questions and turned his attention to the enchantments of the Graceless Dusk. There were no less than six of them:

Enchantments: [Blessing of Mind], [Blessing of Soul], [Blessing of Spirit], [Blessing of Flesh], [Sublime Silk], [Blessing of Dusk].

Somewhat invigorated, he studied the descriptions:

[Blessing of Mind] Enchantment Description: "This Memory enhances one's mental acuity."

[Blessing of Soul] Enchantment Description: "This Memory enhances one's rate of passive soul essence replenishment."

[Blessing of Spirit] Enchantment Description: "This Memory enhances one's ability to endure and recover from mental fatigue."

[Blessing of Flesh] Enchantment Description: "This Memory enhances one's ability to endure and recover from physical fatigue."

[Sublime Silk] Enchantment Description: "This Memory is woven out of sublime, mystical silk. It is impervious and possesses a beautiful splendor."

[Blessing of Dusk] Enchantment Description: "This Memory carries the blessing of Dusk, last sybil of the Estuary. The wearer can establish a mental connection with another being to hear their voice and thoughts, or make their own be heard."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, and then apathetically dismissed the runes.

'Well… I'd say it's a jackpot.'

The Shroud of Graceless Dusk was an incredible Memory, indeed. Its value was only increased by the fact that all but the last of its enchantments were passive — a rare case for Memories of the higher Ranks.

The silk garment would enhance Sunny's thinking, passive essence regeneration, as well as make him tire less and recover from fatigue faster. He would also be able to communicate with other people… or maybe even creatures… telepathically, which was an incredibly valuable ability.

If there was one thing about the Graceless Dusk that made Sunny feel a bit regretful, it was that it did not seem to be oriented toward battle, and instead gifted the wearer with great utility outside of it. That was not too strange, since there were a lot of armor-type Memories like that. Still… a Transcendent one, even if it was made of fabric instead of steel, would not be too shabby.

And he was already thinking about how to use the [Blessing of Dusk] to cause savage mental shock to people. Sunny had plenty of harrowing experiences to share through a mental link...

As he thought about that, the temperature of the ocean surrounding him subtly changed. Looking up, Sunny could see dim lights through the mass of water.

They were approaching the surface.

Chapter-1023: The Fall of Falcon Scott (41)

Sunny crawled onto the shore and lay on the cold stones of the pebble beach for a bit, breathing heavily. It was incredibly nice to lie on solid ground again, but at the same time, his body felt heavy and cumbersome. A part of it had to do with spending some time in the depths of the ocean, and a part of it was simply because he was still tired and low on essence.

'Curse it…'

He had enough sense left, at least, to let one shadow slide off his body and take a look around to make sure that there were no enemies in his immediate vicinity.

There were none, at least not close by. There was only Naeve, who seemed to be doing a little bit better than Sunny. The Nightwalker took a few deep breaths, then slowly sat up.

"We… we actually made it. Gods, I really did not expect to live through this one."

He glanced at Sunny, receiving a vague gesture of confirmation. Sunny shared the feeling.

Naeve grasped his shoulder for a moment, then asked with a hint of morbid curiosity in his voice:

"How did you manage to kill that horror, anyway? Such a devastating mental attack… even Uncle failed to resist it."

Sunny remained motionless for a few seconds, pushed himself off the ground with a tired groan, and glanced at the scion of Night somberly.

Spitting out the Essence Pearl, he then grimaced and said:

"I guess it was just fate… that fiend was fated to die by my hand, and so, fate helped me kill it."

Naeve smiled weakly, then looked away.

"Never took you for a fatalist."

That was when a third figure rose from the water. Bloodwave walked onto the shore, his eyes glinting with shades of deep blue and indigo. Drops of water were rolling down his smooth ebony skin, contours of steel muscles clearly visible under it.

The Saint remained silent for a few moments, looking into the distance. Then, he sighed, and suddenly disappeared. A strong gale threw a scattering of pebbles into the air, making Sunny cover his face with his hand.

'What… what is that speed?'

He lowered his hand and looked in the direction where Bloodwave had dashed. Slowly, his face grew still.

"No…"

Naeve's voice sounded defeated.

The shore around them was empty. Here and there, a few dead Nightmare Creatures lay on the ground, their blood steaming in the cold. Snowflakes were dancing in the air as they fell from the empty sky. There were no brood beasts in sight, and the roar of the distant cannonade was much quieter than it had been when they left…

All good signs.

However, the illusion of peace was destroyed when one saw the port fortress that loomed some distance away.

A large section of its wall was torn asunder and collapsed, and most of the lights that had illuminated the battlements were now dark. There was movement in the breach, silhouettes who looked like

people walking between the rubble with unsteady steps. Beyond that, Sunny could see nothing else.

Remembering the sight of the vast crowd of frightened refugees cowering in the courtyard, he felt his heart turn cold.

…The battle was over, at least. Otherwise, Bloodwave would have already been rampaging among the remaining abominations. The ships anchored near the fortress were intact, as well. Whatever damage had been done to the port did not reach them.

Sunny stood up with a stagger, then dismissed the Essence Pearl and the Nimble Catch. Black threads surrounded his body, soon turning into the grey fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Glancing at the crestfallen Nightwalker, he said evenly:

"Let's go."

The two of them slowly made their way to the fortress.

As they approached, more details became visible.

The bodies of the thralls littered the ground, mangled and torn apart. There were much more of them here than there had been protecting the Terror — thousands of them, all slain despite their dreadful power. It seemed that the defenders of the fort had not surrendered even a single meter of the approach without making the abominations pay a steep price.

Sunny saw Nightmare Creatures of all kinds among the felled thralls, some of them large enough to make him shiver. There were human bodies among them, as well — the former residents of LO49, who had finally found their final resting place thousands of kilometers away from the distant research base.

Perhaps they would have been glad to lay on solid ground again, as well, instead of floating endlessly in the lightless abyss of the ocean.

When Sunny and Naeve walked closer to the breached wall of the fortress, they saw the bodies of the First Army soldiers among the dead thralls, too. Mundane humans, Awakened… there were too

many of them to count.

Sunny felt a bitter feeling grasp his heart.

…This was a part of his victory, as well.

He had been proud, gleeful, and elated after killing the hateful Corrupted Terror, happy to receive a powerful Memory. However, his victory was made possible because most of the creature's drowned guard had been drawn away by the defenders of the port. While Sunny was fighting the Sybil in the depths of the ocean, these men and women were dying here on the shore to give him a fighting chance.

That did not diminish his accomplishment… however, it did put it in perspective. Cruelly so.

Suddenly, Sunny remembered something Master Jet had told him once, years ago, while driving him to the gates of the Academy.

No one can survive in the Dream Realm alone.

'The waking world… it's no different from the Dream Realm these days, is it?'

Maybe it never had been.

Passing between the soldiers that were walking among the bodies, recovering the dead humans and hopelessly searching for wounded survivors, Sunny climbed the rubble to enter the breach and looked at the courtyard of the fortress that was revealed behind it.

The refugees... were alive, pressed against the opposite wall of the yard and pale with terror. There was a light barricade built to shield them from any potential enemy, with soldiers vigilantly standing guard behind it.

The battle seemed to have been the most fearsome just beyond the breach. An actual mountain of corpses was piled up where the defenders had made a desperate last stand, refusing to let the thralls reach the civilians.

Sunny descended into the courtyard and looked around forlornly.

He found Verne's body soon. The enthralled Master was laying on his back, staring at the sky with empty, glassy eyes. His ribcage, shoulder, and skull were crushed by some devastating blunt weapon. He was finally, and mercifully, truly dead.

...Dale was laying nearby, too.

Sunny almost failed to recognize the Irregular captain without his bulky armor — the Memories, of course, had disappeared after the owner's death — and because the body was terribly mangled. However, the insignia of an Ascended of the First Army could still be discerned on the bloodied sleeve of his bodysuit.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny took a few steps forward and kneeled near the mangled body.

He did not really know what to do. The wind was picking up, making him shiver.

Sunny remained silent for a while, and then said quietly:

"You… rest well now, Master Dale. You did well."

'Your nightmare is over.'

Chapter-1024: The Fall of Falcon Scott (42)

The second week of the siege was over.

A few days ago, the Devouring Cloud had been eliminated. The Terror of LO49 had been slain on the same day, as well. More people had been evacuated. More people were being evacuated, still.

The siege capital still stood, firmly in human hands and mostly unbroken.

Sunny was in a familiar office in the underground government complex — the same one where he had met the rest of the Irregular officers before the siege started. The office was much the same, with only the image projected on the false window changed.

It was still showing the view of the city, only now, there were fewer people on the streets. The blizzard was picking up again, too, so the visibility wasn't great.

There was also one more vacant chair.

There were currently only three people inside — Sunny, Jet, and Winter. The three of them were not enough for the large room, so it felt painfully empty.

Winter's eyes were hidden behind her sunglasses. This was the first time Sunny saw her after the day of the battle with the Devouring Cloud… he hesitated for a while, then forced himself to say:

"Dale, he was… a good man."

She turned her head slightly and stared at him for a while. Probably. Sunny could not really see where she was looking.

Eventually, Winter sighed and briefly touched her forearm, where an edge of a tattoo could be seen peeking out from beneath the rolled sleeve of her bodysuit.

"It's alright. I knew that the fool was going to get himself killed, eventually. There were six of us at the start, you know?"

She grew quiet for a bit, then shook her head.

"Back at the Academy. Then, there were only two of us left after the Second Nightmare, and now there's just me. I'll probably be dead soon, too. No regrets, though, as long as it's for a good cause."

Her voice sounded as laid-back as usual, but Sunny could sense a bit of strain in it.

"I'm sorry."

Winter smiled.

"If you're really sorry, Little Devil, make sure to stay alive. You're too young and cute to die. Reaper, you too… I mean, you too try to stay alive. Not that you're young and cute…"

Master Jet laughed.

"Well, if you insist, I'll have to give it a try. Might be a bit problematic, though."

They remained silent for a few moments, enjoying the relaxed atmosphere. All three had been fighting with very little rest in between combat shifts for the past few days, so this meeting was a bit of a reprieve, if nothing else.

Soul Reaper sighed and glanced at her datapad.

"I'll update you on the current state of things. Most of the information has been sent to your communicators, so take a look at it later. The important stuff is… the wall is still holding, but just barely. Three breaches have turned into five, as you must know. Army Command expects that we won't lose control of the defensive barrier unless something catastrophic happens, though."

Winter raised a hand, interrupting her.

"What's the point of talking about it? Let's just get to the actual business. The priority targets… hey, two out of five are dealt with. Sunny killed the Terror, while the Brood Mommy and Brood Daddy of the Devouring Cloud were done in by you, Sunny, and Mongrel. That's great news. What about the other three, though?"

Master Jet lingered for a bit.

"Actually, that's why I called you in today. The Heart of Darkness seems to have disappeared, so we don't have to worry about it yet. Maybe that… thing… won't reach Falcon Scott before we retreat. Goliath, on the other hand, was supposed to show up yesterday. He has been moving very slowly recently, however, for whatever reason, so the time window changed.

We should expect the big bastard to arrive tomorrow, or the day after that."

An uncomfortable silence settled in the underground office. Winter broke it by whistling.

"Speaking of something catastrophic happening, huh? Are you sure we can handle a titan?"

Soul Reaper lingered for a while.

"...Don't fret. Sunny and I will handle him. Saint Bloodwave agreed to come out of the water to assist, too, if we need him. He's not as powerful on land, but a Transcendent is a Transcendent. Overall… it seems like the situation is not entirely hopeless. The First Army has suffered heavy casualties in the past two weeks, true, but no more than Army Command expected.

The evacuation is also only a little bit behind schedule. I'd say that as long as Tyris continues to keep the Winter Beast at bay, we have a real chance of pulling this off."

Sunny shifted in his seat.

"How is she doing, anyway?"

Master Jet gave him a long look and thought before answering. Her voice was a bit wistful:

"Well… Sky Tide is doing fine. White Feather lost a lot of people during the battle with the Devouring Cloud, but her husband and immediate family survived… Roan will be out of commission for a couple more weeks, sadly. Coincidentally, the House of Night lost many Awakened on the same day, as well. The forces of the great clans here are diminished, but they still pack a bite.

Their heavy hitters are all alive."

Sunny let out a sigh of relief. He had been somewhat worried about Saint Tyris and Master Roan… it was good to hear that both of them were fine.

Soul Reaper yawned, then put her datapad on the table and gave him a poignant look.

"Back to Goliath, though. How is that project of yours coming along?"

He stared at her for a moment or two.

"That depends. Have you gotten those Memories I requested?"

Jet winced.

"...No. There are a lot of Sleepers that need to be armed, and a lot of Memories being lost every shift with people carrying them dying before having a chance to transfer anything. I'll be able to receive a few in a couple of days, but… we probably don't have that long."

Sunny sighed, then gave her a bitter smile.

"That's fine. The project is all but finished. I have a few spare Memories as an emergency replacement, it's just that I would have preferred not to waste them."

Winter gave them both a curious look.

"Are you two talking in code? What project? What Memories? You guys are not trying to buy a boat on the black market and sail into

the sunset together, are you?"

Soul Reaper grinned.

"Just a little something Sunny has cooked up in that devious head of his, to solve our titan problem. I'll tell you if we have some free time today."

She glanced at the clock, the smile disappearing from her face.

"That said… you should go get to it, Sunny. Don't linger. Army Command has been known to make wrong estimations before."

He nodded, then stood up and spared the two women one last glance. They were probably not going to see each other again until Goliath showed up… and maybe never again, after.

He remained silent for a moment, then smiled.

"We don't need to buy a boat on the black market, by the way. My Rhino is a fully amphibious vehicle, so it can take us over the strait no problem. As long as nothing swallows it on the way, of course. Anyway, if something happens… you are both invited, so…"

With that, he winked and hurriedly left the office.

Once Sunny was outside, however, his smile disappeared, and was replaced by an expression of focused concentration.

'This is it, then… no more time to waste.'

Chapter-1025: The Fall of Falcon Scott (43)

Sunny followed the network of underground tunnels to reach the barracks, and then emerged from them near where the Rhino was parked. Breathing in the cold air, he spent a moment to enjoy the lack of desire to cough — the strange trauma he had received after touching the Nightmare Gate was all but gone now — and walked forward through the darkness.

Snow was crunching under his feet.

'Weird. Is this a good sign, or a bad sign?'

The street illumination in the city often went awry because of the numerous Gates outside and within the wall. Usually, the army technicians and civilian personnel would fix and replace the damaged components promptly, but this section was barely lit. No one seemed to have cleaned the snow in a while, either.

Had the state of the city deteriorated to the point where no one bothered with these things anymore, or was it simply the result of so many people having already been evacuated? By now, only about a third of the initial two hundred million remained trapped in Falcon Scott.

Maybe the person assigned to maintain this small corner of the city was already safely across the strait, with no one to replace them.

Perhaps it was both.

Glancing at the dark sky, Sunny rubbed his face and walked toward the Rhino.

The last few days had been… hectic.

By all accounts, he should have been dead tired and on the verge of collapsing from sleep deprivation. However, Sunny felt fine… in fact, he felt rather great. His body was full of vigor and vitality, while his mind was fresh and focused.

The reason, of course, was the Shroud of Graceless Dusk.

He glanced down, studying the Transcendent Memory.

The Graceless Dusk looked like a simple tunic of fine, soft silk. He had expected it to be white, but to his surprise, the tunic turned out to be of a rich and beautiful black color, with intricate patterns embroidered along its collar, hem, and sleeve edges with silver thread. The hem reached just below his knees, while the sleeves ended at his elbows.

The tunic was tied at the waist by an unadorned cord of black silk, and came with a pair of dainty shoes made of the same fabric, with a soft sole that was more suited for a well-tended garden than wilderness. Sunny enjoyed the fact that it allowed him to move around without making the slightest noise.

The shoes only looked dainty, too.

The black silk that the tunic and the shoes were made of was light and soft, but more durable than tempered steel. Sunny had tested how impervious it was, exactly, and was surprised to find out that the Cruel Sight could not pierce the thin fabric no matter how hard he tried.

It did not burn, get wet, dissolve in acid, or suffer damage from any other elemental attacks he had at his disposal. Only the Sin of Solace managed to cut the black silk, and even then with a lot of trouble.

…Which was not to say that the Graceless Dusk could serve as a good suit of combat armor.

The tunic itself left his forearms, shins, head, and neck exposed, while the soft shoes only covered his feet and ankles. Worse than that, neither were rigid — while the black silk was very hard to pierce, it did nothing to stop blunt attacks and concussive trauma.

The Marble Shell could deal with that, to some extent, but it was still not an ideal situation.

However, Sunny did not really care. The Graceless Dusk did not make any noise and was extremely light, not constraining his movements at all. More importantly, the other benefits of the Transcendent garment far outweigh its lackluster defense.

The four Blessings were a great boon, as well as the reason why he felt so invigorated despite the recent lack of rest and sleep.

The [Blessing of Flesh] and the [Blessing of Spirit] made him tire much slower, both mentally and physically, while the time he needed to recover from fatigue was drastically cut. In the days after the battle with the Devouring Cloud, Sunny had only slept for a couple of hours at best, and yet he felt very refreshed and energized.

The [Blessing of Soul], meanwhile, boosted the rate at which his essence regenerated. That was an awfully pleasant and valuable benefit, especially here in Antarctica.

Finally, there was the [Blessing of Mind]... that one was the strangest, but also the most powerful.

The enchantment did not exactly make him smarter or more insightful, but it did make his mind more… productive. It was as though there were several compartments within his head now, each capable of running a separate task concurrently — as long as it was not too demanding. That made simple calculations and analyzing clear information easier and faster.

The effect was not new to Sunny, since he had been doing more or less the same thing for a long time, in order to control his shadows.

He was long used to perceiving and comprehending the world from several different viewpoints, which all but required him to sort of split his consciousness into several streams… however, after doing some research due to the Graceless Dusk, he had discovered that most people found such a task to be hard, or even impossible.

In any case, his already deviant ability to partition his mind and

multitask was boosted even further by the [Blessing of Mind].

…Needless to say, all of that was extremely useful when applied to weaving.

With his mental capacity increased and his essence regenerating at a much faster rate, Sunny had finally been able to crack the case and turn the devil's needle into a Memory. He was not sure that he would have been able to achieve quite the same result without the boost provided by the four blessings.

There was the fifth blessing, too...

The Blessing of Dusk.

This active enchantment was a very insidious one. It allowed Sunny to establish a telepathic connection with another person, or even several, to communicate with them through words and other, more crude means of sharing information such as emotions and vague images.

Sadly, he could not simply read their minds, since the communications had to be intentional. That said, the recipients of the link were also unable to refuse it — if Sunny wanted, he could bombard them with the most gruesome and loud thoughts, causing something akin to a mental shock.

Those with weaker minds were outright stunned, while those with resilience and discipline were at least bound to be disoriented.

Of course, the first person Sunny had tried to communicate with telepathically was Saint. To his disappointment, the [Blessing of Dusk] did not work on her at all, probably due to the Shadow's immunity to mind attacks. He still did not know what was going on in that beautiful onyx head of hers.

And speaking of Saint…

Entering the dark interior of the Rhino, Sunny called the taciturn knight forth. She stepped out of his shadow, the plume of her helmet brushing against the vehicle's roof. Suddenly, the massive APC seemed cramped and narrow.

Looking up at his loyal devil, Sunny smiled.

"Are you hungry? How about a late-night snack?"

Chapter-1026: The Fall of Falcon Scott (44)

The graceful knight stared at him indifferently, not showing any reaction. The ruby jewels of her eyes glowed with menacing crimson flames, revealing no emotion. Sunny sighed.

"Oh, come on... don't you understand what is happening? Just… emote, please! It won't kill you… I think…"

Saint remained silent and as aloof as ever, causing his heart to ache.

Cursing under his breath, Sunny looked away and summoned the runes. The shimmering symbols appeared in the air in front of him:

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Ascended.

Class: Devil.

Shadow Cores: [4/7].

Shadow Fragments: [2973/4000].

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Extraordinary Rock], [Prowling Thorn], [Endless Spring], [Dark Wing], [Moonlight Shard], [Weaver's Mask], [Broken Oath], [Autumn Leaf], [Cruel Sight], [Covetous Coffer], [Heavenly Burden], [Memory of Fire], [Memory of Ice], [Strike of Thunder], [Morgan's Warbow], [Shadow Lantern], [Bone Singer], [Shadow Chair], [Overpriced Saddle], [Dying Wish], [Sin of Solace], [Bitter Cusp], [Stifled Scream], [Weaver's Needle], [Essence Pearl], [Nimble Catch],

[Shroud of Graceless Dusk], [Siege Souvenir], [Incessant Seeker].

His shadow fragments were already closing in on three thousand. That was not the important part, though.

Sunny studied the list of his Memories with a pained expression, then looked down and concentrated on Saint's name.

Shadow: [Onyx Saint]

…Shadow Fragments: [196/200].

He was so close… she was only three and a half fragments away from saturating the counter.

Sadly, there was no time to hunt for Memories anymore. There was no time for Saint to slowly recover in his core in case she got wounded, either, which was why he had not sent her to defend the wall in the last couple of days.

Sunny could have gone and begged for a few Memories from people he knew, but there was no need. He had been prepared to fail to reach his goal on time. All it meant was that he had to sacrifice several Memories of his own.

The problem was that he cherished all of his Memories. They were all useful in their own way.

Some were integral to his battle prowess, some were a form of insurance for unexpected situations. The Dark Wing and the Heavenly Burden, for example, were far from stellar Memories — however, he needed them in case there was no way to avoid an aerial fight. Other Memories possessed useful enchantments that he wanted to replicate one day.

Some Memories Sunny had outgrown, but was attached to them sentimentally. More than that, he hoped to pass them on to Rain should she become a Sleeper.

Really, there was only one useless Memory in his arsenal — the Silver Bell. However, Sunny was reluctant to sacrifice it. That was the first Memory he had ever obtained, and the first Memory he had changed

with sorcery. It was also a… a memento that reminded him of happier times.

'It's just a Dormant Memory of the Second Tier, too. Consuming it won't satiate Saint at all.'

Nevertheless, he had to sacrifice something. In the end, Sunny sighed bitterly and summoned three Memories.

A heavy kunai, a glistening gem made of polished red coral, and an arrow with green fletching appeared in front of him.

The last one was the [Incessant Seeker] — an Ascended arrow of the Second Tier he had received recently. It was as powerful as the Strike of Thunder, but possessed enchantments that guided it toward a single target and enhanced the damage dealt to that sole enemy.

Which was a real boon. However, Sunny had many other ways to deal high damage to a single target.

The second Memory… was the Broken Oath. As always, Sunny winced when its soul eroding aura started slowly dissolving his own soul. It was a great charm that had served him well many times in the past, and synergized perfectly with Saint's immunity to soul attacks.

Its power as an Awakened Memory of the First Tier was not great, though. With the caliber of enemies Sunny was facing these days, it was like a drop in the ocean. Aside from that, Saint was mostly fighting alongside Nightmare now, and would hopefully be surrounded by more Shadows in the future. The others did not possess the same immunity, which limited the usefulness of the red gem.

The first Memory Sunny summoned was the Prowling Thorn. He sighed again, looking at the kunai with regret.

There was nothing wrong with the throwing dagger, and they had gone through a lot together. But it had outlived its usefulness. Sunny would have preferred to keep the Prowling Thorn simply for utility, but the situation demanded he let go of something.

…Sunny had already lost the Patient Avenger, and now, he was going to lose three more perfectly fine Memories. He felt as if his heart was bleeding.

'Waste… such a waste…'

He closed his eyes, and then handed the dagger, the gem, and the arrow to Saint without looking.

"Here. You… you eat these. Enjoy your meal!"

The graceful onyx knight silently took the Memories and crushed them in her fists without pausing even for a moment. Hearing the dreadful sound, Sunny was stunned.

'She… she didn't even hesitate! Those were very precious, damn it!'

Opening his eyes, he saw four streams of radiant sparks being absorbed into the Shadow's body. Then, her eyes flashed with dark glee.

The runes still hung in the air, the counter showing:

Shadow Fragments: [200/200].

In the next moment, the shadow that existed where Saint's soul should have been suddenly rippled. The four dark embers in its depths shone with lightless radiance, and wisps of black flames rose from her armor.

Sunny took a step back, mesmerized by the familiar scene.

He had already seen it once, back when his taciturn knight Ascended.

In the next moment, Saint's figure was enveloped entirely by the black flames, making it impossible to see her. A powerful gust of wind blew through the interior of the Rhino, both unbearable heat and chilling coldness assaulting Sunny at the same time. He blinked.

'Uh… crap… maybe I should have done this in the Soul Sea…'

But there was nothing he could do now but wait. Nervous for his

expensive APC, Sunny summoned a barrier of shadows to surround Saint. A minute passed in tense silence, then two…

Then, something exploded within the barrier, shattering it easily and sending Sunny flying back.

A wave of darkness rolled through the Rhino, turning its interior into a mess and cracking its armored windows from within. The enormous vehicle shook and trembled, then grew still with a loud groan.

Sunny scrambled back to his feet and stared at Saint, who was standing in the same spot, seemingly unchanged.

However, the darkness dwelling within her was now much deeper and more frightening. Her onyx body was radiating a sense of vast, dreadful power, and the menacing crimson flames dancing in her ruby eyes were brighter.

His Shadow — now a Transcendent Devil — tilted her head slightly, looking at him with her usual indifference. But Sunny could feel a hint of emotion hidden behind it.

Pride. Satisfaction.

Gratitude?

Slowly, a wide grin appeared on his face.

Sunny brushed the Graceless Dusk, straightened, and looked at the menacing devil with a smile.

"...Should I start calling you Saint Saint now, huh?"

Chapter-1027: The Fall of Falcon Scott (45)

His Shadow was a Transcendent now.

Sunny found it hard to believe, even though he had been the one who made her Transcendence possible. It was just that Saints held a special place in human culture — they were the epitome of vast and unobtainable power. They were more demigods than people… enigmatic and awe-inspiring, so distant as to almost be ineffable.

He was now a Master himself, and on top of that, one of the strongest there was. But even still, a huge gap separated Sunny from someone like Sky Tide or Bloodwave, which he did not dare test.

To think that a similar existence now served him… it was hard to comprehend. Saint's Transcendence, without a doubt, marked a new chapter in Sunny's rise to power.

Of course, it was unclear where the onyx knight was truly equal to the mighty Saints of the human race.

In terms of purely physical prowess, she was at least on par with them, and most likely far superior. Her skill was outstanding, as was her talent and willpower… after all, Saint had always been outstanding. She often triumphed over adversaries that were much more powerful than her.

But so were human Transcendents. There was no such thing as an average Saint — each and every one of them were the absolute best of the human race, battle-hardened warriors of utmost talent, resolve, and ability, with thousands upon thousands of bloody fights under their belt.

There was also one fundamental difference between humans and

creatures such as his Shadow… humans possessed Aspects, while creatures did not.

Saint had just gained her powers, wielding elemental darkness to strengthen her body and her weapons. However, every human Transcendent wielded a powerful Aspect and was armed with several potent Abilities, including the Transformation.

They were also all carriers of the Nightmare Spell.

Simply put, Sunny did not know who would end up victorious if Saint fought a human Transcendent. He had a feeling that, by herself, the onyx knight would lose… however, if she was augmented by his shadows, the result might be very different.

…Luckily, he had no intention of combating Saints any time soon.

Dismissing the Shadow, Sunny sighed and spent some time cleaning up the mess her Transcendence had made of the interior of the Rhino. The APC was in a sorry state, but still functional.

'See, the day is only getting better and better…'

Or was it night?

Here in Antarctica, it was always night, so sticking to the old notion of time was getting harder and harder.

He made himself a late supper — or an early breakfast — and settled in the lounge area for a few minutes. After a while, his communicator made a familiar sound. It seemed that the siege capital's communication array had activated, as it usually did twice a day, sending packets of data to those with a bandwidth quota.

Sunny looked at the new message with some relief. Rain was doing fine, it seemed… her response was shorter than usual, but she was obviously not experiencing any symptoms of being infected by the Spell.

He had always been worried about his sister, and after observing so many mundanes being killed by the First Nightmare here in Antarctica — and having killed many monstrous abominations their

bodies had turned into — that worry only grew stronger.

Sunny sighed.

'She's okay. She's safe… there is no reason for her to contract the Spell, to begin with. And even if she does, Serpent is with her.'

Sunny missed his serpentine Shadow. It would have been tremendously useful during the Southern Quadrant campaign, considering how dire his need for essence had been from day one in this cold hell. Not to mention the versatile and powerful nature of Serpent's abilities.

And yet, Sunny had not regretted leaving it with Rain even once. Her safety took precedence… and he had many other ways to protect himself. If anything, experiencing the bitter hardships of the Antarctica campaign without the Serpent had given him an opportunity to learn how to manage his essence with utmost efficiency, as well as vastly improve his control over it.

Thinking of his Shadows, Sunny suddenly felt curious about their relationship to his Class. Even though the Soul Serpent was currently away, each of the Shadows occupied one of his cores. Did it mean that he would only ever be able to control seven of them, at most?

If that were the case, maybe the dismal rate at which he received Echoes was not such a terrible thing. He might have been very upset if someone like Kurt — the Awakened psychopath he had killed in the waking world — prevented him from turning Nightmare into one of his Shadows.

That time, his dislike of the man, and of the idea of owning human Echoes, had prevented Sunny from wasting fragments on the transformation, but he would have caved in if given a better opportunity.

Or, wait… would he have even been able to make Kurt into a Shadow without losing Saint or Serpent? He was just an Awakened Monster back then, possessing only two Shadow Cores…

'I'm rambling.'

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, staring into the distance.

He was thinking about unnecessary things to distract himself from what was about to come.

Goliath was approaching.

The creature that had almost killed him once.

The Fallen Titan had already destroyed one siege capital, so there was a real chance that Falcon Scott would be destroyed by the abominable giant, as well. Sunny and Jet were determined to slay the gargantuan creature of stone, but anything could happen.

Even if their preparations worked, there was no telling what damage would be done to the city wall before the titan perished… if he perished.

This day might turn out to be the last day for many, many people. Maybe even Sunny himself.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

'Over my dead body. Well... obviously, that's kind of a given...'

With that, Sunny forced a pale smile onto his face and picked up his communicator.

His response to Rain did not contain any of the grave worries that gnawed at him. Even though she was smart enough to read between the lines, Sunny made an effort to hide the ugly truth as well as he could.

That was for his benefit, too.

While writing messages to Rain, Sunny was almost able to believe in his own lies.

Not knowing the truth was a solace…

Chapter-1028: The Fall of Falcon Scott (46)

Some time later, the members of his cohort approached the Rhino. Belle, Dorn, Samara, Kimmy, Luster… walking inside, they froze for a moment, studying the upturned interior of the APC and the cracks in its armored windows with stunned expressions.

After a while, Luster cleared his throat.

"Uh, sir… what happened?"

Sunny gave him a deadpan look.

"I had a lady over. She Transcended."

The young man laughed nervously.

"Ah… good one, sir…"

After that, he practically ran to the pilot's cabin to check on the internal systems of the Rhino. As Luster went through the diagnostics, he kept mumbling under his nose:

"Gods… did he crash it into a titan? This damage… oh, my poor baby…"

Sunny shook his head and addressed the rest of his soldiers, speaking loudly enough for Luster to hear, as well:

"Prepare yourselves. Army Command is certain that Goliath will reach the city either today or tomorrow. In any case, we won't be leaving the wall until he does. This… is going to be the big one, guys."

His soldiers grew somber, their eyes full of calm determination.

Sunny nodded.

"Don't worry about the titan himself. Colonel Jet and I will take care of the big bastard. However, Goliath is not going to show up alone… and, judging by how Erebus Field fell, there is a big chance that the wall will be breached. I don't need to tell you how important it is to prevent the Nightmare Creatures from getting inside.

However, if the situation becomes hopeless, be ready to retreat to the secondary line of defense within the city."

He paused for a moment, looking at them with a serious expression.

"Don't be stupid and die an unnecessary death. I need you alive… to fight tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and the day after that. Dying might as well be considered desertion, at this point. No one is allowed to die without my permission. Understood?"

The members of his cohort grinned, then saluted.

"Yes, sir!"

"Wouldn't think of it!"

"I am scared of you way more than I'm scared of death, sir! I wouldn't dare!"

Sunny blinked a couple of times at that last one, then nodded.

"That's great. Let's go, then."

Soon, the Rhino started and moved forward with some effort. They drove across Falcon Scott, where a lot of streets were now empty, and a lot were unlit. Snow piled high in some areas, and in others, crowds of refugees were anxiously hurrying through the cold.

Luster was stubbornly sticking to only the well-illuminated roads, for some reason, which made the progress a bit slow. The wall steadily grew closer and closer.

Before they reached the secondary defense ring, however, Sunny suddenly ordered him to stop the APC. The young man looked back

with a silent question.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then said:

"Wait for me here. I won't be long."

With that, he left the Rhino and walked toward a familiar dormitory tower, which happened to be nearby.

No one was cleaning the snow in front of its entrance, this time. Sunny stood there for a minute or two, staring at the flimsy doors with a grim expression. Eventually, he sighed.

'Even if the whole city is destroyed, this damned dormitory must remain standing. I'll make sure of it.'

With that, he turned around and started walking away.

…When he did, however, he almost stumbled into someone approaching the dormitory.

"Watch where you're going, idi… huh? Sunny?"

He sighed and looked up, noticing Beth and Professor Obel. They must have been returning from their own shifts — Beth at the volunteer center, the old man at the engineering wing of the government complex.

The young woman blinked a couple of times, staring at him with surprise. Before Sunny could come up with something to say, she asked:

"Aren't you cold?"

He opened his mouth, then looked down, at the thin silk tunic covering his body. Indeed, it did not look exactly like something a person should be wearing in the middle of winter.

Sunny cleared his throat.

"I'm not, actually. Uh… elemental resistance, you know."

Beth scoffed.

"You're still a human, are you not? Put something warm on, for Spell's sake… I imagine fighting on the wall with a running nose is not a great idea. Ascended snot is still snot…"

He looked at her silently for a few moments, then suddenly laughed.

"Ah, yes. I am still a human, that's true. Thanks. I'll try to remember that."

Professor Obel took a step forward, smiling.

"Were you on your way to visit us, Major Sunless? Come, come… there's no point in standing here, in the cold…"

Sunny smiled, then lightly shook his head.

"No, I was actually on my way to start the shift on the wall. Army Command is expecting a big fight, so it's all hands on deck… well, even more so than usual. In any case, make sure to remain inside and be careful in the next day or so. Things might get a little hectic."

The old man nodded with a sigh.

"I see. Well, we won't keep you, then. Please stay safe."

He moved forward, but then paused and patted Sunny on the shoulder.

"Ah, maybe you'll stop by after your shift, then? It's nothing much, but Beth received a bit of extra rations today. We are planning to cook up a feast for everyone who is still waiting for a ticket, in our block. I will save you a portion."

Sunny remained silent for one moment too long, then shrugged.

"Why not? It's a promise."

He watched Professor Obel and Beth disappear inside, then slowly turned around and walked back toward the Rhino.

As he walked, the smile disappeared from his face, replaced by a dark, ruthless expression.

Deep shadows nestled in his eyes.

'It's time to kill a titan.'

What happened at Erebus Field could not be allowed to repeat itself. Goliath had to die, and Sunny was just the person to kill him. And eye for an eye, a death for a death.

Sunny was a very petty and vindictive person, and the two of them... they had a score to settle.

Chapter-1029: The Fall of Falcon Scott (47)

The winds were howling as they crashed into the colossal bulwark of the city wall. The soldiers of the First Army were shivering on the battlements, staring into the hazy mist of the blizzard with grim expressions. These were the lucky ones — the less fortunate were far below, on the ground, ready to defend the breaches with their lives.

Because of the ugly rifts in the defensive barrier of the city, the logistics of the siege had become much harder. Today, it was especially so, since no one knew the direction from which the titan was going to attack.

Goliath could come from the south, marching across the ravaged landscape and shaking the earth with his every step. He could come from the north, emerging from below the dark waves to attack the port fortress first. For all Army Command knew, he could even crawl from under the ground… the scope of the titan's abilities was still a mystery.

That was why the defenders were dispersed along the whole perimeter of the wall instead of congregating at one or several of its sections.

However, Sunny and Jet, as well as their two cohorts of Irregulars, had found themselves in a familiar spot — right above the main entrance of the siege capital, not too far away from the Nightmare Gate that had torn through the wall not too long ago.

Sunny was sitting with his back against the alloy parapet, meditating. Soul Reaper was standing nearby, looking across the vast killing field, the landscape obscured by the veil of snow. Both were trying to ignore the whispers of the Call.

It was more than a bit annoying, to have to deal with it on top of the sickening anxiety of waiting for the start of the battle.

Sunny sighed, then looked up at Master Jet. His hair was getting in the way, so he brushed it aside. Before he could speak, she suddenly asked:

"Why don't you cut it?"

He coughed in embarrassment.

"Oh… the thing is, mundane scissors and autobarbers stopped working on me. I should probably just use a sharp Memory and cut it myself… yeah, that's what I'll do, one of these days…"

Jet looked away with a smile.

"I know a guy back in NQSC. He's very in demand, as one of the few Awakened hair stylists around. There are many Saints among his clientele, but if you want, I can get you a recommendation."

Sunny laughed.

"...Sure. When we're back in NQSC."

He remained silent for a few moments, then asked:

"How sure are you that we'll be able to destroy Goliath?"

Soul Reaper hesitated.

"As long as you pull off your part of the plan, pretty sure. Bloodwave will step in if something goes wrong, too. It's a shame that Sky Tide is away fighting the Winter Beast again… but we should be alright without her."

Sunny nodded.

"I think so…"

However, Jet interrupted him by raising a hand. He grew quiet and raised an eyebrow.

She looked into the darkness with a calm expression.

"Listen."

Sunny did so, hearing nothing but the wind and the stifled breaths of the thousands of soldiers surrounding them. Then, a muffled sound reached his ears from somewhere far away.

Boom.

And then, after a long and arduous pause, again.

Boom.

Sunny stood up, staring into the blizzard. Suddenly, he felt a chill creeping up his spine.

"He's coming."

From a vast distance, the thunderous steps of the colossal giant were rolling over the world. Even though the soldiers could not see anything because of the raging snowstorm, the sound alone made them pale and grasp their weapons with trembling hands.

Boom… boom…

Boom...

Each one assaulted them, almost like a mental attack.

Jet tried to contact Army Command, then cursed when the interference made it impossible. Calling out one of the messengers, she said tersely:

"Inform the HQ that Goliath is approaching from the south. We need reinforcements here as soon as possible. Go!"

The pale-faced messenger saluted and disappeared from view, and then, there was nothing for them to do but wait.

By Sunny's side, the members of his cohort were preparing for battle. Everyone around was doing the same, and from the impenetrable

white haze beyond the wall, the steps of the giant continued to boom, slowly growing louder… and closer… and much more frightening.

Boom!

And then, after a torturous span of silence, again:

Boom!

Sunny gritted his teeth, and on the battlement behind him, four shadows shivered.

Hidden in the blizzard, Goliath was slowly approaching Falcon Scott. No one could see him, but the heavy steps of the titan sounded like foreboding war drums. Soon, the ground started shaking with each of them. The tremors traveled through the alloy structure of the city wall, making it vibrate.

Sunny felt his body growing stiff, as if paralyzed by the memory of being crushed and broken by the giant's foot. Humans could not really recall pain, but remembering the feeling of being hurt was very easy, especially if one was hurt terribly. He had almost died that day… he should have died, if not for a couple of Memories and a bit of luck.

His body remembered being destroyed.

Snarling, Sunny shook off the paralyzing fear and peered into the blizzard, hoping to see the hateful shape of the walking mountain.

Instead, he just heard...

BOOM.

BOOM.

'Damnation.'

BOOM!

BOOM!

…Suddenly, the thunderous steps stopped.

A moment later, a rift appeared in the wall of the blizzard, and for a few moments, he could see far and wide.

Sunny's eyes narrowed.

Out there at the edge of the killing field, a giant creature stood in front of the mountains. Taller than the city wall by far, the titan looked like a mountain himself — his vaguely humanoid body was broad and misshapen, made of uneven, weathered stone. He had three mighty arms, and one enormous eye that stared at the soldiers of the First Army with an alien, cold, terrifying malice.

The milky eye was completely white, having no iris and no pupil.

…Behind and around the titan, a vast and dark sea of bodies was undulating as it flowed down from the slopes of the mountains. Nightmare Creatures, a stunningly large horde of them, were following the Fallen Titan.

For a moment, the world seemed frozen.

In that dreadful instant, Sunny forced himself to smile. All of it — him coming to Antarctica, marching with the First Army across its cold expanse, surviving LO49, clawing his way back north with a train of refugees, the long weeks of fighting at Falcon Scott — had been for this moment.

He looked at Goliath with murderous intensity.

'Come here, bastard…'

In the next moment, as if answering his call, the giant stepped forward.

Chapter-1030: The Fall of Falcon Scott (48)

As soon as Goliath took a step forward, and the wall vibrated under Sunny once again, he called upon Saint.

By his side, Master Jet mounted the parapet of the battlement, clinging to it with one hand and ready to push herself away. In her other hand, the slender glaive weaved itself from snowflakes.

The sea of Nightmare Creatures flowed forward, overtaking the marching colossus. The familiar thunder of discharging rail guns tore the snowstorm apart, and the turrets joined them a moment later, drowning the world in a roaring cacophony.

A tall and graceful figure clad in onyx armor stepped onto the wall from the shadows. Instantly, her fearsome presence permeated the air, making soldiers turn around and crane their necks, staring at the menacing black knight in fright. Saint's ruby eyes flashed with cold crimson flames.

Someone yelled.

"It's Mongrel!"

"Mongrel is here!"

"Thank the gods!"

Their calls rolled across the wall, and the soldiers that had been shaken by the terrible visage of the marching titan regained some of their confidence. Even though Saint was dwarfed by the looming shapes of bulky MWPs, at that moment, she seemed much greater than the towering machines.

"Show that ugly boulder who's in charge, Mongrel!"

…As for Sunny, no one paid him much attention. Whatever fame he had earned among the fighters of the First Army paled in comparison to his flamboyant alter ego. After all, unlike him, Mongrel was a mysterious character. People were free to fill in the blanks using nothing but their imaginations, and the things they came up with were always much more fantastical than the truth.

Well… at least the version of the truth about Sunny that he shared with the world. The actual truth was so outlandish that no one would probably believe it.

'Doesn't matter…'

Watching Goliath walk forward, Sunny summoned a very special Memory… the one he had worked so hard to create. His payback gift to the stone giant.

The [Siege Souvenir].

Suddenly, a very lengthy and sharp javelin appeared in Saint's hand. It was about three meters long, incredibly heavy, and entirely white. A sense of immense, wild, destructive power radiated from the white javelin, making even Sunny himself feel slightly uncomfortable.

Of course, the javelin was the quill of the Corrupted Devil he had collected from an army warehouse a long time ago — the thing Sunny had spent most of his free time in Falcon Scott trying to enchant.

The Siege Souvenir was now a Transcendent Memory, and a very special one at that. Several Transcendent soul shards, as well as rivers of essence that formed numerous shadow strings, had gone into its creation.

The long javelin possessed only two enchantments.

The first one was [Death Dealer], which Sunny had copied from Morgan's Warbow. Bestowing that one to the devil's needle had been hard, but also somewhat straightforward.

The difficulty Sunny had met was merely one of scope. Of all the enchantments he had learned and recreated before, that one was the vastest and most difficult. However, there was no alternative — [Death Dealer] was the most destructive single-target enchantment in his arsenal, and so, nothing else would have done.

It was also extremely, dreadfully gluttonous in its consumption of essence.

…But not gluttonous enough, as far as Sunny was concerned.

That was where the second enchantment he had bestowed on the Siege Souvenir came in. That one had no name… because it was invented by him. Creating it was not technically hard, but required Sunny to teach himself an entirely new facet of weaving, as well as accomplish something he had never done before — not simply copy, but disassemble and heavily modify an existing enchantment.

The enchantment that had served as the basis was the [Unbroken] of the Midnight Shard. It allowed the wielder access to a vast reservoir of power when at death's doorstep, as long as the wielder refused to surrender and kept fighting against overwhelming odds.

Sunny was not interested in augmenting the javelin with additional power, nor was he interested in creating a limitation tied to how close someone was to death or their character.

What he was interested in was the reservoir itself.

After all, [Death Dealer] had to be powered by something.

And so, Sunny had spent many, many arduous hours studying the weave of the [Unbroken], trying to understand how it worked, what element of the tapestry of ethereal strings was responsible for which part of it, and how to isolate the effect he wanted to achieve — how to create a reservoir of power that could feed the Siege Souvenir from the inside.

In the end, with the timely help of the Graceless Dusk, he had succeeded in both of his undertakings.

The white javelin was much, much longer and heavier than an

arrow… in fact, calling it a javelin was somewhat misleading, since it was more akin to a projectile worthy of a siege engine. Nevertheless, it possessed the capacity to deliver the same devastating force as an arrow sent flying with the help of the [Death Dealer], only at a much greater scale.

A lot of power was needed to achieve that effect — much more power than anyone in Falcon Scott could have supplied in one go. That was why Sunny had enchanted the Siege Souvenir to possess an independent reservoir of essence, and siphoned a sea of it into the javelin over the days.

He had basically created an entirely new type of Memory. Weak Memories usually possessed passive enchantments that were powered by the ambient essence used to manifest the Memory. Powerful Memories usually possessed active enchantments that required the wielder to manipulate and spend their own essence in order to use them.

The Siege Souvenir, meanwhile, possessed a dire enchantment that fed directly on the javelin's own essence.

The result of his hard work was a tremendously powerful Memory. It was so powerful, in fact, that only refined material harvested from a Corrupted creature could withstand the dreadful enchantments. Anything less would have disintegrated under strain.

Even then, the Siege Souvenir was bound to be a one-use Memory. The quill of the Corrupted Devil was not going to survive the release of its own destructive power.

There was one last hurdle to overcome to make use of it, though.

Not just anyone could wield it. Even Sunny himself was not strong enough to make use of his creation in the intended way.

That was why he had needed Saint to evolve… he needed a Transcendent being to bring forth the Siege Souvenir's potential.

…And now, he had one.

Chapter-1031: The Fall of Falcon Scott (49)

Goliath walked forward, the world quaking under the weight of his steps. The sea of Nightmare Creatures was flowing past his titanic feet, and all around them the furious blizzard was slowly retreating, the winds dying down as pale starlight washed over the vast killing field.

On the tall, broken wall of the city, thousands of turrets were roaring as they sent rivers of bullets into the attacking horde. The moonless night was torn apart by the glow of overheated barrels, the shine of swift tracer rounds, and the flashes of railgun rounds striking their targets in a conflagration of force, heat, and blinding light.

A few of those heavy tungsten rounds had hit Goliath, only to disintegrate fruitlessly without leaving even a scratch on the stone hide of the menacing titan.

The soldiers of the First Army trembled as they joined the barrage — the mundane soldiers, the Awakened, the towering war platforms, the few Masters that were still alive after two weeks of the dreadful siege. On the ground near the breached sections of the wall, others were shivering as they craned their necks to stare at the approaching titan.

…However, Sunny remained still.

'Closer… get closer…'

He was perhaps the only human in Falcon Scott who wanted the colossal giant to walk faster. The Siege Souvenir could only be used once, so he had only one shot to shatter Goliath's stone carapace.

Standing indifferently by his side, Saint raised the long javelin and

placed it on her shoulder. The four shadows moved, fusing with her onyx armor. It shone with black radiance, and the feeling of great power emanating from the graceful figure of the taciturn stone knight instantly became much vaster, much deeper, and much more terrifying.

At the same time, darkness flowed from Saint's gauntlet, slowly spreading across the length of the white javelin. Its whiteness was consumed, replaced by a lightless blackness. While the Transcendent Devil herself was augmented by the shadows, her weapon was now enhanced by the [Blade of Darkness].

There was the [Mantle of Darkness], as well, which made Saint stronger when surrounded by darkness and shadows. Sunny summoned the Shadow Lantern, allowing it to consume all surrounding light.

Soon, the three of them — Sunny, Saint, and Jet — were hidden from sight within a circle of deep shadow.

'Almost there…'

The fastest of the Nightmare Creatures — those that had survived the barrage, meaning the strongest and most vile of them — were already moments away from reaching the wall, separating into four wide rivers of flesh to attack the four breaches. Goliath, meanwhile, was a few steps away from crossing half of the killing field.

Sunny looked directly at the hateful giant and prepared to give Saint the command…

At that moment, however, something changed.

The titan's massive, malformed head turned slightly, and his sole eye stared back.

Sunny shivered.

There were thousands and thousands of humans on the wall, and all of them must have looked like mere ants to Goliath. However, somehow, it felt as though the titan was gazing directly at him.

The weight of that gaze was almost physical. No… it was much more dire than that.

Sunny gritted his teeth, feeling a very bad premonition grasp his heart.

'What…'

Then, the milky surface of the giant's eye quivered… and slid away like an eyelid.

Behind it, a second eye was revealed. Unlike the first one, which was white and had neither an iris nor a pupil, that one was of a furious red color, as if made of pure magma, and had three incandescent pupils floating in its depths, like windows into a scorching inferno.

Suddenly, Sunny was enveloped by unbearable heat. He felt water streaming down on him, and looked up to see the snow clouds melting in the skies above. Bizarrely, it was raining in the middle of the polar winter.

Beneath him, the seventy-meter tall defensive wall of the city suddenly moved and groaned. Glancing over the parapet, Sunny saw with horror that the impregnable alloy… it was melting, too.

All around him, the mighty MWPs were collapsing into puddles of liquid metal, the pilots screaming as they burned alive. The barrels of the powerful turrets disappeared into streams of incandescent drops, and the mighty railguns grew silent. A few meters away, Samara screamed and flinched back from her rifle, a vicious burn marring her cheek.

Across the entire southern section of the city wall, the great defensive barrier bent and deformed, moments away from collapsing entirely. Countless people plummeted to their deaths or were consumed by the immolating heat.

All of it happened in an instant.

'Gods…'

Knowing that there was no time to waste, Sunny shuddered as he

changed his command slightly and sent it to Saint.

The onyx knight instantly moved.

Taking a single step, she raised the javelin behind her. For a moment, Saint's entire body turned into a graceful arch — from the tip of her foot, to her hip, to her shoulder, to her fist.

Then, her hand whipped forward, and the battlement under her shattered from immense pressure. Even her vambrace cracked, shards of onyx falling down like precious gems.

At the last moment, the four shadows slid from her fingers and wrapped themselves around the Siege Souvenir.

The long, immeasurably heavy javelin shot forward with the speed of lightning. Immediately, there was a deafening boom of sound barriers being pierced, and a powerful shockwave rolled across the battlement, throwing people off their feet.

The artificial Memory streaked across the black sky like a line of pure darkness, creating a whirlpool of hurricane winds in its wake.

A split second later, it hit Goliath right in the eye.

There was a flash of light, and then a world-shaking thunderclap.

And then, the sound of shattering stone.

The Siege Souvenir plunged right between the titan's three pupils, disappearing into the red molten eye entirely. Then, it burst from the back of the giant's head in an explosion of broken stone.

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

As Sunny watched in stunned silence, vast cracks snaked through Goliath's head. The colossus froze in a strange pose, its torso leaning slightly back. His eye was completely destroyed, and his head…

His head shattered and fell apart, giant slabs of stone plummeting down from a great height. The walking mountain swayed, twitched, and then slowly started to tilt.

Everyone — both the humans and the Nightmare Creatures — froze, watching the titan fall in utter shock.

Sunny blinked.

'What… what just happened?'

As if responding, the Spell whispered softly into his ear:

[You have slain a Fallen Titan, Minor Shard of the Stone Titan].

[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

Chapter-1032: The Fall of Falcon Scott (50)

The colossal, headless body of Goliath tilted forward, and then started to fall. Because of its enormous size, it seemed as though the giant's corpse slowly floated through the air instead of crashing down in an obliterating avalanche of stone.

However, hundreds of Nightmare Creatures below were already panicking as they tried to flee and escape being crushed to death.

Sunny froze, momentarily stunned.

'...What just happened?'

He… he had killed the damned bastard? How? That was not what was supposed to happen!

Sunny had poured countless hours into creating the Siege Souvenir and making sure that Saint would Transcend in time. However, he had never expected to slay the Fallen Titan with one strike. A titan was a titan! They were not supposed to die so easily.

The plan was for the javelin to shatter the stone carapace on the chest of the giant, creating a path toward his heart. Master Jet was supposed to enter the breach and destroy Goliath's soul cores from within, while Sunny and Saint would attack from the outside. Together, they were meant to slowly bring the giant down… and maybe even survive the process.

When the titan had revealed his incandescent eye and started melting the city wall, Sunny was forced to switch targets and command Saint to aim for the eye instead. He had never thought that Goliath would be killed by that single strike.

…Was that eye the titan's Achilles heel?

Kim had not noticed a pronounced vulnerability after they encountered the giant on the coastal highway, though. Maybe her powers were not enough to see it? Or was the vulnerability only exposed when Goliath revealed his inner, hidden eye?

In any case, the titan… the titan was undoubtedly dead.

Sunny had killed him.

For a moment, a dark glee ignited in his heart.

'That's for Erebus Field, you foul bastard… and for me, too. That is payback for almost killing me…'

But then, his glee disappeared. By all accounts, Sunny should have felt exhilarated — he had killed a titan, after all! But instead of joy, he felt chills running down his spine.

Suddenly tense, Sunny looked around. The armaments of the defensive barrier were all but destroyed, and the wall itself was damaged and deformed. A few sections had collapsed entirely, but most still stood.

The defenders had suffered heavy losses, especially among the pilots burned to death with their MWPs. Many soldiers had lost their rifles, and the outer layers of their powered armor suits were severely damaged. However, there were still enough of them alive to continue the fight… maybe.

Luckily, most Awakened had managed to dismiss their steel Memories, saving them from being destroyed, and were now summoning them back.

Everyone was still in utter shock, mesmerized by the sight of the slowly toppling colossus.

Something was wrong, though. Very, very wrong.

…Goliath should not have died that easily, or that fast.

Master Jet, who had been hanging outside the wall, ready to push herself forward to follow the plan and attack the titan, climbed back and looked at him, a rare expression of bewilderment written on her face.

"Sunny, what the hell… how?"

He lingered with the answer, staring past her at the falling mountain.

"I... don't know."

'I killed him. I did…'

Even before the body fell, wide cracks appeared all across it. Chunks of stone were splintering off and falling down. From the distance, it almost looked as if the giant… had been diseased, his skin covered by sores and ulcers.

And the cracks. Behind some of them, instead of solid stone, there was nothing but darkness. As if parts of the titan's body had been hollowed out long before the battle.

Moments before the massive corpse crashed into the ground, Sunny's eyes widened.

'Curse it!'

In the next second, the colossal mass of stone collided against the earth, making the whole world shake. Enormous clouds of snow, dirt, and debris rose into the air, and countless Nightmare Creatures were crushed under the obliterating weight. A thunderous roar rolled over the killing field, and shards of stone shot outward like bullets, decimating even more abominations.

One more section of the wall collapsed.

However, that was not what Sunny was looking at. His gaze was locked on the massive corpse itself.

When Goliath's body hit the ground, large portions of it cracked like the shell of a rotten egg. And from within…

A tide of darkness flowed, eviscerating the few wounded Nightmare Creatures that still clung to life and stretching toward the broken city wall like black tentacles.

'The Heart of Darkness…'

The river of black beetles had mysteriously disappeared some days ago, and almost at the same time, Goliath's speed had decreased.

The beetles liked to tunnel through mountains and devour mighty creatures from within. The Fallen Titan had been like a walking mountain himself, and mighty beyond belief as well. Someone should have guessed that the giant might have been parasitized by the legion of the tiny, dreadful creatures. But no one had.

It was so clear… in hindsight. Sunny himself had been too blinded by the threat of the titan to consider such a possibility. His preconceived notions of what constituted power, and his personal animosity against the stone giant, resulted in a ruinous case of tunnel vision.

'Damn it!'

He glanced at the city defenses once again, realizing that almost everything that could have been used against vast swarms of tiny vermin had been destroyed by Goliath. The First Army had been prepared to face one overwhelming enemy, not myriads of dangerous, but comparatively weak creatures.

He looked at Jet, his lips trembling.

"Bloodwave…"

She frowned.

"What?"

Sunny grabbed the Soul Reaper by the shoulders and barked:

"Bloodwave! Summon Bloodwave here! He's our best hope of stopping the Heart of Darkness!"

She hesitated for a short moment, then looked beyond the wall and

hissed an explicit curse. Then, Jet took a step back and started summoning a Memory that was supposed to give the fearsome Saint a signal to abandon his duty of protecting the ships and join the battle.

Sunny, meanwhile, was already moving, calling upon a few Memories of his own.

He had no idea how they would be able to handle both the vast horde of Nightmare Creatures that had come with Goliath and the tide of black beetles with the defensive barrier ruined and barely holding.

The wall was severely damaged, and many of the soldiers had either died or were rendered helpless, their weapons destroyed.

…And yet, they had no other choice but to fight, and claw the victory out of fate's grasp somehow.

There was simply nowhere to retreat.

Chapter-1033: The Fall of Falcon Scott (51)

For a few moments, both Sunny and Jet stood motionless, staring at the tide of enemies advancing at the damaged wall. Their faces were grim. Eventually, Soul Reaper spoke in a dark tone:

"This is bad. This is really bad…"

That was an understatement.

Currently, Falcon Scott was facing two threats.

The first one was the uncountable horde of Nightmare Creatures that had followed Goliath, and was now flowing across the killing field like a dark tide. Some of them had already reached the deformed barrier and engaged the defenders of the breaches in a furious melee, some infiltrated the city through the new fissures in the melted wall and were now rampaging in the staging area.

With the turrets destroyed and the mighty railguns heavily damaged, there was no way to slow down the advance of the horde. Even the MWPs were destroyed, and most of the soldiers had either lost their weapons or were seriously injured.

The only ones who remained relatively unscathed were the Awakened — there were around seven hundred of them on the southern section of the wall, and most were still able to fight.

There were reinforcements coming from the other three sections of the wall, but it was going to take some time for them to arrive. Time that they did not have.

The second threat was the Heart of Darkness. Four rivers of dark beetles were flowing toward the ravaged wall, reaching for it like

giant black claws. Each individual beetle was capable of biting through powerful armor-type Memories, metal, and flesh.

Their only redeeming quality was that the tiny vermin were not too hard to crush… which was why Army Command had planned to rely heavily on the powerful defensive armaments in case the dark swarm showed up. With those armaments mostly destroyed, the danger posed by the Heart of Darkness had risen tremendously.

There were several Ascended with Aspects suitable to face such an enemy, as well, but some of them had died in the past two weeks, while others were not on the southern section of the wall, since no one had expected the Heart of Darkness to attack this day.

'Damn it!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny looked at Jet.

"So… what do we do?"

At that time, a familiar flaming arrow, albeit much weaker than it had been during the battle against the Devouring Cloud, flew into the mass of beetles from somewhere much further down the wall. Winter was still alive, at least.

Master Jet let out an angry hiss.

"There is no choice but to retreat to the secondary defense perimeter and enact the following protocol. However… even that is impossible right now. If we don't want to lose the city, we need to push the horde back and give the men enough time to run. We also need to obliterate the damned bugs!"

Push back the horde… Sunny suddenly felt cold. There were so many holes in the city wall now that it was basically useless. That meant that the only way to stall the abominations was to sortie out and face the Nightmare Creatures on the killing field, blade against claw. Needless to say, that was nearly a suicide mission.

Even if the defenders of Falcon Scott succeeded, their losses would be staggering.

…There was another option, of course.

The Awakened could abandon the mundane soldiers and run. Logically speaking, leaving mundanes to die and preserving the arguably more valuable asset was a valid strategy. War was not a purely logical affair, though… the most reasonable strategy was not always the best strategy. Things like spirit, morale, and mutual trust had much greater weight than Sunny had once thought.

Any army without these intangible qualities would be doomed.

As a colonel and an Ascended, Master Jet was the senior officer on the southern section of the wall and the person in charge. The decision was hers, and Sunny did not envy her position one bit.

She lingered for a few moments, then took a deep breath and shouted, her voice spreading far and wide due to the effects of a special Memory:

"This is Soul Reaper Jet! All Awakened, assemble in cohorts and prepare to sortie! We must push the enemy back! All mundane personnel, abandon the wall! I repeat: abandon the wall! I am ordering a full retreat to the secondary defense line…"

As soon as the echo of her voice disappeared into the cold night, Jet stepped toward a messenger that had lost his footing during the titan's attack, grabbed the man by the collar, and pulled him to his feet with one powerful motion.

The slightly disoriented soldier stared at her with a pale face. She looked at him somberly for a moment, and then said quietly:

"Inform Army Command to prepare the Rampart Protocol and be ready to activate it as soon as I give the command. If I die… they should act at their discretion."

The frightened man nodded and disappeared, using his Aspect Ability to run at incredible speed.

With that done, Jet glanced at Sunny. She remained silent for a moment, then smiled darkly.

"Are you ready?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Not even a little bit."

Soul Reaper laughed and turned to the killing field, her smile disappeared like a phantom.

"Well, tough. While the Awakened are fighting off the Nightmare Creatures, someone has to deal with the bugs. They absolutely cannot be allowed to enter the city. I'll stop the left… swarm. Send that awesome Echo of yours to face the middle-left one, and go to the middle-right yourself. Bloodwave will handle the last one.

With some luck, the Ascended who were supposed to deal with them in the first place will arrive to reinforce us before everyone dies… the couple of them who are still alive…"

Sunny looked at her with a dubious expression.

"How am I supposed to fight against countless thousands of tiny bugs?"

Master Jet sighed.

"You're resourceful. Figure something out… and if you do, let me know. I am asking myself the same question."

With that, she turned away to give orders to her cohort.

Sunny did the same.

Belle, Dorn, Samara, Luster, and Kim were looking at him, their eyes uncertain. He forced out a smile.

"You all heard the boss. We are going to sortie with the rest, then push forward and block one of the beetle swarms. I'll take point. Samara, you lost your rifle, so just blast any that get past me with essence. You'll be our secondary slayer. Luster, support Sam.

Belle, Dorn, and Kimmy… you guys will protect Luster and Samara.

Don't let the bugs bite through your armor."

His soldiers looked at each other, then silently nodded.

A few moments later, Soul Reaper's voice rolled across the battlements once again:

"...Attack!"

Chapter-1034: The Fall of Falcon Scott (52)

The special shutes built into the wall had mostly been destroyed or damaged, so the Awakened had to use other means to sortie into the killing field. Some rappelled down, some summoned Memories capable of slowing one's fall, some simply used the exposed framework of the great barrier to swiftly climb to the ground.

The few surviving Masters stationed on the southern wall went first to clear the landing.

Saint mounted Nightmare, who leaped from one protruding sheet of deformed alloy to another, reaching the swarming abominations in mere seconds. Wielding the Cruel Sight, she quickly slaughtered the nearest enemies.

Sunny was not far behind. He glided through the air using the Dark Wing, then dismissed it a couple dozen meters above the ground and plummeted down, landing among the Nightmare Creatures like a cannonball. The Sin of Solace danced, effortlessly slicing through flesh and bone.

It took Sunny only a few seconds to carve out a small island of safety. The members of his cohort joined him, forming a beachhead. More Awakened followed behind them, grim determination shining in their eyes.

Everyone knew that for many, if not most of them, this was going to be the last fight. Nevertheless, no one tried to flee or turn back.

'...It is strange.'

Cutting down a lunging beast, Sunny glanced at the descending Awakened. Surely, all of them valued their lives… maybe if left

alone, most would listen to their fear and their desire to survive, and choose to save themselves instead. However, they had all been swept up in the moment and lost their reason.

They were all individuals, but more than that, they were also parts of something much larger right now. A crowd, a mob… a collective had no fear of death, because the destruction of one of its small parts did not mean the destruction of the whole.

Maybe that was how these people suppressed their utterly natural and reasonable desire to live, knowing that even without them, the larger entity they belonged to would continue to exist.

Was that what Professor Obel had meant when he said that humanity needed a bit of stupidity to survive?

In any case, the feeling was alien to Sunny. He had spent most of his life being refused and rejected by the collective, so naturally, he valued himself more. There was really nothing more valuable than himself, and things he personally held dear.

…And yet, here he was, charging into the horde of Nightmare Creatures with the rest of the Awakened of the First Army. Of course, his situation was vastly different — Sunny was pretty sure of his ability to at least escape alive, no matter what happened. But he was still taking a great risk for no apparent reason.

Was it stubbornness? Was it pride? Was it spite and unwillingness to admit defeat? Or had he actually become infatuated by the same sense of collective responsibility as these selfless people?

He truly did not know. However, the word "selfless" seemed rather vile and frightening to Sunny. After all, his self was all he had. Without it, what was the point of staying alive?

Gritting his teeth, Sunny brandished the Sin of Solace and pushed forward, cutting through one abomination after another like a ruthless, eerily graceful butcher. At some point, his three shadows joined him, wrapping themselves around his body — the fourth one he had sent to help Nightmare.

Sunny was surrounded by a fine haze of blood, but whenever drops of it fell on his black tunic, they rolled off the soft silk without leaving the slightest trace.

The Graceless Dusk remained immaculately pristine.

He left the hundreds of Awakened behind and advanced into the horde, leading his cohort toward the river of black beetles.

Luckily, it was not very hard to reach, because the dark river was flowing forward to meet them, as well.

Before the Irregulars clashed with the claw of the Heart of Darkness, though, Bloodwave finally arrived at the battlefield.

The mighty Saint landed like a falling star, causing the earth to split and a shockwave to spread outward in all directions. Away from water, most of his powers would be of no use…

But a Transcendent was still a Transcendent.

Wearing dark grey armor sewn of sharkskin and wielding two curved swords, Bloodwave instantly turned into a whirlwind of steel, moving with such speed and force as to resemble an annihilating blur. Countless Nightmare Creatures disappeared into it, and the blurry twister instantly turned red from the mass of blood.

More than that, the champion of the House of Night was perfectly aware of his vulnerability on land. For that reason, his soul arsenal included many powerful Memories to account for that weakness… among other things.

As soon as Bloodwave appeared, three Echoes manifested by his side. One was a monstrous crab the size of a house, one resembled a towering golem of wet clay, and the last one was ethereal and elusive, like a creature made of fog.

Sunny's eyes glinted when he realized that the creature shrouded in fog was actually Transcendent itself. It would have been powerless underwater, but here under the walls of Falcon Scott, the Echo could exert truly devastating power.

A small shadow fell from the sky, and a familiar black bird landed on Bloodwave's shoulder, cawing something into his ear. A moment later, the Saint and his Echoes changed direction, heading for one of the four rivers of darkness.

'Maybe we can actually pull this off…'

Throwing all unnecessary thoughts out of his head, Sunny concentrated on carving a path toward the tide of beetles. Somewhere behind him, hundreds of Awakened were desperately pushing against the horde of frenzied abominations, killing and dying without holding anything back.

An ear-splitting groan of tearing metal thundered as another section of the wall collapsed, unable to withstand its own weight after suffering severe damage to its inner structure.

He paid it no attention.

'How am I supposed to fight against the damned bugs?'

The Sin of Solace could cut through dozens with each swipe, but there were countless thousands of them. Trying to kill the entire swarm with a sword was no different from trying to cut the sea.

He had a couple of tools capable of mass destruction… Shadow Manifestation, the Strike of Thunder… he could also control the swarm, somewhat, with the Dying Wish. Best of all, the beetles would have to try very, very hard to bite through the Marble Shell.

Sunny was not too worried about his defense. It was the offense that posed an issue.

'I guess I'll just have to manage, somehow…'

A few moments later, the mass of Nightmare Creatures around them diminished, and those who did lunge at the cohort looked more panicked than consumed by bloodlust. It seemed that the Heart of Darkness cared not about whom it devoured — humans or abominations.

And there, behind these last few monsters…

The tide of darkness was rushing toward Sunny once again.

Chapter-1035: The Fall of Falcon Scott (53)

As the river of darkness surged forward to devour Sunny, the small lantern of black stone hanging on his belt opened, and a tide of shadows rose from within it to meet the swarm of beetles.

He held nothing back, unleashing every wild shadow he had tamed, from mundane and shallow ones to those that were ancient, vast, and unfathomably deep. The night itself seemed to move, as well...

It moved to answer the call of the Master of Shadows.

Two dark tides met with a deafening thunder, and thousands of beetles were instantly broken, crushed, and ground into black dust. Some shadows were vanquished, too — and yet even more persisted. Permeated by Sunny's essence, they were as deadly and resilient as an Ascended weapon would be.

With no sun and no moon to illuminate the skies, there was nothing but dim starlight, and a few distant flames, to chase away the darkness. The whole world was shrouded in shadows, and so, Sunny had an almost infinite well of them to call upon. The only limitation was his essence.

However, the number of beetles was even more limitless. Despite thousands of them being destroyed in the initial confrontation, it was no more than a drop in the ocean. Already, even more were surging forward, crashing into the wall of shadows and tunneling into it with their sharp mandibles.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny poured more essence out, strengthening the wall and turning it into a tall dam. Almost instantly, cracks appeared on its surface, and a moment later, the river of dark beetles overflowed, spilling over the top of the dam and spreading wide to

encompass it from the sides.

Funneled by the Dying Wish, all of them rushed toward a single point — Sunny himself.

'...Die!'

He launched himself forward, moving with enough speed to leave afterimages behind. The Sin of Solace lashed out, slicing through two dozen beetles with a single strike.

Almost at the same time, a radiant orb of charged essence shot past Sunny and violently exploded in the surging mass of darkness — Samara had joined the fight, using her Aspect Ability directly instead of channeling it through the tungsten rounds of a rifle.

Together, they managed to slow the beetles down a little. Sunny turned into a whirlwind of annihilating jade, delivering half a dozen swift attacks in an instant.

However, even though cutting through the small creatures was not too hard, the effectiveness of these attacks was low. Almost instantly, he switched to using the flat of the jade blade to crush them — with his strength, each blow sent a concussive wave through the mass of dreadful pests, damaging and breaking their tough little bodies.

His mind was split, one part commanding his body, the other controlling the manifested shadows to hold back the dark river.

…And yet, it was not enough.

'Damnation!'

No matter how fast Sunny moved and how many blows he delivered, the number of beetles was simply overwhelming. Already, many had flowed past him — some tried to turn around to attack from behind, but the pressure of the thousands more pushing forward brought them away, forcing Belle, Dorn, and Kim to engage the creatures in melee.

Out of the three, Dorn was able to destroy the most with his Aspect Abilities and the heavy sledgehammer. Belle used himself as bait,

phasing from place to place and using his sword to cut down as many small creatures as he could. Kim, with her rapier and buckler, was the least suited for this battle, but she did her best to lessen the pressure on the two formidable warriors.

Behind them, Samara continued to charge small beads of alloy with essence and flicking them into the mass of beetles, each streaking through the air like a bullet and exploding into a wave of destructive force. Once her supply of alloy beads and needles was exhausted, she would have to use the crudest form of attack and simply toss out projectiles formed of unrestrained, wild essence.

...They were holding, for now, but the tide of dark beetles was growing more and more overbearing with each moment. Their number endlessly swelled, and the dam of shadows was being continuously destroyed and rebuilt, consuming Sunny's essence like a gluttonous beast.

Some distance away to his right, Bloodwave and his Echoes had engaged another tentacle of the Heart of Darkness. To his left, Saint and Nightmare were holding back the third. And further still, behind them, Jet and her cohort were fighting the fourth.

'This isn't working… this is not enough…'

Sunny knew that, if nothing changed, he and his soldiers would be devoured by the appalling vermin. Already, many of the dark beetles had gotten past his defenses and bitten into his skin. Their sharp mandibles only left shallow scratches on it, which almost immediately healed, but still... the memory of one of these vile creatures crawling inside his rib cage made him shudder.

It was only a matter of time before several bites would turn into a dozen, then a hundred, then a thousand… would the Marble Shell be able to withstand countless thousands of mandibles plunging into it? Even if it did, it was only his skin that was so resilient.

Once he was buried under a cold, slithering carpet of darkness, the beetles crawling into his mouth, into his nostrils, into his ears, into his eyes... would he be devoured from within?

The Sin of Solace laughed.

"Wouldn't that be a sight to behold? Ah, yes… yes, it would… I can't wait!"

Uttering a silent curse, Sunny tried to pay the whispers of the jade sword no attention and concentrated on eviscerating as many of the beetles as he could.

'I… I need to think of something…'

He could always use Shadow Step to escape… not, not quite. The last time, a few beetles were pulled along with him as he stepped through the shadows. Most likely because the small creatures were not, in fact, alive.

'...Not alive?'

A bizarre idea suddenly appeared in his mind, but he quickly dismissed it. Even if it worked, he would only be buying himself a few seconds of respite, at most.

What Sunny really needed was to enhance his offensive ability, to find a way to destroy many, many more beetles every moment. However, he was only human… there was only so much that his small body, no matter how strong, could do.

No, his best hope was Shadow Manifestation. He was already using it to hold the river back and grind many beetles into dust… but that was not enough. Was there anything else he could do?

Summoning a dozen shadow hands to crush and obliterate the beetles would work, for a bit, but it would also burn his reserves of essence with terrible speed. Those hands would not be able to strike with as much strength as he himself could, as well…

'Damn it! If Serpent was here, I could have ordered it to assume the form of a massive monster, and crush thousands of the damned vermin with each step…'

Consumed by revulsion and fear at the thought of being eaten from the inside, driven to his limits, and desperate to find a way to defeat

the river of darkness… at that feverish moment, Sunny suddenly felt something click in his head. Scraps and pieces of previously accumulated experiences connected together, forming a tentative hint of a revelation.

The revelation was strange, unclear, and dubious.

'That… should not be possible, right?'

However, he really could not see why not.

Sunny sensed the endless ocean of formless shadows around him, all malleable and ready to answer his call.

If Soul Serpent was not here to assume the shape of a dreadful monster…

...Why not try to turn into one himself?

Chapter-1036: The Fall of Falcon Scott (54)

The [Formless] Ability allowed Soul Serpent to assume the shape of any shadow contained within its master's soul, as long as it was the shadow of a creature that was of the same or lower Class and Rank.

Once transformed, Serpent would not only look like the creature, but also inherit its traits and abilities.

…Sunny, however, was not the Serpent.

While he trained his mind and body to possess some facets of the formlessness of shadows, he was still a human. Even if he used Shadow Step to turn incorporeal, he would not be able to make use of the same mystical ability.

He could, however, command the shadows and manifest them into tangible forms.

What did it mean?

Slowly drowning in the tide of black beetles and feeling their sharp mandibles scrape against his skin, Sunny continued to fight… and think. His thoughts were desperate and feverish, but at the same time, his mind was strangely calm.

His first uses of Shadow Manifestation had been very simple — nothing more than shapeless shadows turned tangible and pushed into motion. The only form they had was the one caused by the motion itself, and so, they looked like dark tentacles.

Later, Sunny trained for a long time to be able to effortlessly manipulate the shadows into more structured shapes. Chains, blades, walls, and a few more — with those, he had made several incredible

achievements. Building a bridge over a vast chasm, stopping the advance of a mighty titan… were not things a Master was supposed to be capable of doing.

However, his crowning achievement in the use of Shadow Manifestation was the shadow hands. Although not as powerful, durable, and numerous as the dark chains Sunny could create, they were vastly more complex and intricately structured. A hand had to have a rigid frame, flexible joints, dozens degrees of freedom, and many more aspects that few people ever stopped to consider.

Controlling one was also much more complicated.

Currently, Sunny could skillfully implement two types of shadow hands: the cruder and larger ones acted as an independent fighting force during battles, while the much more agile ones, scaled to the size of his body, were used to give him an extra pair of hands for complicated tasks.

So… if he could already create hands and arms… what was to stop him from shaping shadows into a full creature?

Sunny growled as he was pushed back by the river of darkness, wide cracks appearing on the dam he had created. Behind him, Belle, Dorn, and Kim were barely holding on against the ever-increasing number of the vile beetles. Just at that moment, Dorn was a split second too slow to bring his sledgehammer down, and one of the small creatures landed on his armor.

The enchanted metal instantly split, but before the beetle could burrow under the giant man's skin, Kim's rapier flashed and pierced the beetle. The sharp blade wounded Dorn, as well, but receiving a shallow cut was infinitely better than having a murderous little creature tear through his insides.

Sunny gritted his teeth, striking down with the Sin of Solace.

What was to stop him? The answer was very simple… complexity.

Even shaping a functioning hand was already incomparably hard. He had spent a lot of time teaching himself how to shape shadows into

hands on the fly — creating an actual moving construct in the form of a creature would have been a hundred, if not a thousand times harder.

Plus, such a creature would not be very deadly, since in the end, it would just be a more complicated Ascended weapon.

There was something that could solve both of these problems in Sunny's possession, though…

His knowledge of Shadow Dance.

Shadow Dance allowed him to observe a person — or a creature — and learn the very essence of their style and physicality, then shadow it. How they moved, how they thought, how they felt, how soul essence flowed through their body. Of course, none of that would be possible if he did not first understand the structure of the body itself.

If Sunny knew how a body was shaped and worked on an instinctual level, the task of forcing shadows into that form would become much, much easier.

Additionally, he did not have to make that form act independently. To translate his own power through it instead of relying solely on the strength of the shadows themselves, he could build it around himself like a shell… he could wrap it around his body like his own shadows wrapped around it.

'It's like a… it's like a suit of exoskeleton armor in the shape of a Nightmare Creature… a shell of shadows, with me powering it instead of the other way around…'

If he succeeded, he would be able to assume the shape of a Nightmare Creature — just like Soul Serpent could. Of course, there would be a vast difference. Unlike his Shadow, Sunny would not inherit the creature's attributes and abilities, but the physical form itself was already enough.

He took a deep breath, almost swallowing one of the beetles. A savage expression appeared on Sunny's face, and he flinched back, narrowly avoiding the lunging pest.

Would he really be able to pull this off?

'There's only one way to find out…'

To attempt something like that, though, Sunny needed two things. First, he had to choose a suitable form, and one that was exceedingly familiar to him. The better he knew the shape of a creature, the higher his chances of success would be… and even though he had shadowed many abominations over the years, there were very few that Sunny was confident in recreating.

Secondly… he needed some time, with nothing to distract him from the task. Even if it was just a few seconds, attempting something that crazy for the first time could not be done in the middle of a furious melee.

Sunny could come up with some monster to try turning into, but several seconds of peace were much harder to come by.

Unless…

The bizarre idea that he had thought of some time ago suddenly popped back into his mind.

He crushed a hundred beetles with an obliterating strike of the flat of his jade sword, then continued to rain one attack after another on the inexhaustible river of vermin, summoning a new Memory at the same time.

Soon… a large alloy chest appeared in front of Sunny, large enough for him to comfortably lie on.

It was the Covetous Coffer.

Sunny commanded the Memory to open its lid, then pushed it on the side and swiftly hid behind it. He also called back the deepest and most ancient shadows unleashed from the Shadow Lantern, hoping to shape them into a monstrous form…

The Coffer was a storage Memory, and by now, its capacity was rather large. After months spent in Antarctica, that space was mostly empty.

All kinds of things could be stored inside the alloy chest, with two restrictions — the things could not be too big, and they could not be alive.

The black beetles, though… were not alive. Sunny did not know what they were, but since the creatures could travel with him through Shadow Step, which suffered from a similar limitation, there was a good reason to believe that the Coffer would be able to swallow them, as well.

…And it did.

Positioned between the tide of black beetles and Sunny, who wore the Dying Wish, the alloy chest was like a bottomless abyss. A river of the vile creatures flowed into it, hoping to tear through the bottom of the Coffer and get to the human hiding behind it. However, all of them simply disappeared into the spatial storage space instead.

A second passed, and then another, with countless thousands of beetles entering the dark chasm of the Coffer's maw and never appearing again.

After one more second, though, the storage space started to overflow. The lid of the chest instantly snapped shut, and then, the Memory dissipated into a whirlwind of white sparks.

The river of beetles surged forward to devour the human…

What rose from the veil of sparks, however, was not a human at all.

Instead, it was a fearsome creature that towered at almost three meters in height, with onyx black skin and a bestial, demonic face. Its mouth was full of sharp fangs, and four long horns crowned its head, protruding from dark, coarse hair.

The creature had four hands that ended with sharp claws, and a long twisting tail. Its eyes were entirely black, with no irises and two vertical, furious pupils.

A terrifying growl escaped from its mouth.

'Success.'

...Of course, Sunny had chosen the shape of a creature he was most familiar with.

The Shadowspawn Devil.

Chapter-1037: The Fall of Falcon Scott (55)

Sunny had spent many long months in the body of the nameless shadowspawn. From the bloody floor of the Red Colosseum to the burning streets of the Ivory City, he had fought countless battles with the Awakened creature's four clawed hands.

…However, he had never experienced being the Shadow Devil as an Ascended.

Possessing the power of a Master and augmented by shadows, he exploded with truly terrifying might. At three meters of height, Sunny had suddenly turned into a vicious herald of destruction. He lunged into the mass of dark beetles, eviscerating hundreds of them in a split second.

He was holding a sword in each of his four hands — two of them were the Sin of Solace and the Midnight Shard, and two were shaped from shadows. Each moved with staggering speed, weaving a translucent sphere of devastation in the river of darkness.

Fighting with four swords was, perhaps, not the best idea against most opponents — however, Sunny did not need a lot of control and agility to deal with the beetles. All he needed was speed… more speed, more attacks, no matter how crude. With four swords and longer reach, the rate at which he destroyed the vile creatures increased tremendously.

He cut and crushed them with his four swords, stomped them with his clawed feet… even his tail was swiping through the swarm, obliterating many beetles. For a few moments, the river of darkness seemed to slow its advance.

Sunny used those moments to slaughter even more, alleviating the

pressure on his cohort and allowing Samara to renew her bombardment of charged essence.

The strangest thing about it… was how comfortable he felt.

Even while shaping the shadows into the form of the Shadow Devil, Sunny had no idea how easy or hard it would be to control that shell. As it turned out, it felt almost indistinguishable from the real thing… all he needed to do was summon the memories of the Second Nightmare into his mind, and bring them to life with the help of Shadow Dance.

Like shadowing a memory of a creature instead of the creature itself.

Of course, the demands were high… he needed to know the shape of the shadow shell in startling detail. Sunny suspected that he would not have been able to turn himself into many other creatures, if any at all. However, his knowledge of the Shadowspawn was nothing short of instinctual — instead of controlling the construct consciously, he simply allowed himself to become it.

The other demand was essence. Sustaining the shadow shell burned through it with dire speed. His reserves were not exhausted yet… but he knew he wouldn't be able to keep being the Shadowspawn for long. He had to do a lot of other things, as well — like power his Memories and manifest more and more shadows to repair the tall dam.

…The situation had improved, but they were still on a timer. If nothing changed soon, the result would be disastrous.

'Don't think about it right now. Just… kill! Kill as many as you can! The damned beetles have to have a breakpoint, too…'

Everything turned into pure chaos.

Sunny felt as though his physical power was almost uncontrollable now. He pushed and pushed himself, expecting to hit a limit, but that limit never came. His speed, his strength, his force… all of it had vastly increased, to the point where his thoughts were starting to fall behind his movements.

Countless thousands of beetles were destroyed. Faced with the hurricane of swords, claws, horns, and fangs, the river actually recoiled, giving up several meters of frozen soil. At some point, Sunny thrust one of the shadow swords forward and let go of it.

Instead, arcs of electricity appeared on his palm, and then formed into an arrow that seemed to be made of lightning. Sunny stabbed it into the mass of beetles, causing an incinerating chain reaction to destroy numerous creatures.

He was hurt by the devastating current of electricity, as well, but due to the elemental resistance of the Marble Shell and the augmentation of the shadows, the damage was superficial and almost tolerable.

There was no time to think, only to fight.

Somehow, miraculously… Sunny was holding the swarm of the black beetles back.

The Dying Wish was pulling them toward him like a magnet, but instead of washing the towering Shadow Devil away like a dark tide, they were being constantly ground to dust, cut to pieces, and incinerated by lightning as soon as they entered within his reach.

Those that flowed past Sunny were dealt with by the members of his cohort. Samara was causing one explosion after another to bloom in the midst of the swarm, while Luster fed her a steady flow of essence. Both were nearing their limit… but they had not reached it yet. The same was true for Belle, Dorn, and Kim.

Sunny couldn't see Saint and Nightmare, but from the glimpses of how little progress the second swarm had made, he knew that they were doing their part, as well.

The third swarm, the one Bloodwave was supposed to deal with, seemed the most damaged. The three Echoes were holding it back, but the fearsome Saint himself was nowhere to be seen. He was probably hidden somewhere within the river of darkness, fighting furiously… since the Echoes had not dissipated, he had to be alive, at least.

The only ones Sunny knew nothing about were Soul Reaper and her cohort, since they were too far away. Still… he believed that Master Jet would not go down easily.

'Keep fighting… keep fighting…'

Sunny could feel his shadow shell slowly coming undone.

After long minutes of rampaging within the dark river of vermin, it had sustained a lot of damage. He tried to repair the wound delivered to the towering Shadow Devil by summoning and manifesting more shadows, but many beetles were already crawling within. Their mandibles scraped against the silk of the Graceless Dusk or his skin from time to time, fruitlessly for now.

His every muscle was burning from strain, and his mind was becoming clouded from fatigue. It took a lot, to keep the shadow shell intact and moving… he had to let the dam crumble a couple of minutes ago, already, because the pressure of it all was just too demanding.

Nevertheless, Sunny kept fighting.

In fact, the more tired and fatigued he became, the fiercer his rampage grew, and the louder the Sin of Solace laughed, whispering ugly truths into his ears.

"You'll never make it… give up… leave your soldiers to die and save yourself… come on! It's so easy… just turn into a shadow and slip away… no one will know... no one will tell... everyone will just die..."

'...How irritating.'

Sunny tossed the Strike of Thunder into the surging mass of beetles once again, enduring the piercing pain of being electrocuted by its lightning, and felt one of his two shadow hands crumble down.

'Ah… not good…'

He prepared to summon a new shadow to reshape it… but then, something changed.

A strange ripple went through the river of darkness, and it suddenly lost cohesion. The purposeful tide of black beetles grew discordant and shapeless, many of them simply growing still.

Some continued to throw themselves at Sunny, while others scurried away.

Nestled within the battered shadow shell, he blinked.

'What… what just happened?'

Chapter-1038: The Fall of Falcon Scott (56)

'Tired… so tired…'

Sunny smashed through the nearest beetles and jumped back, sliding a few dozens of meters across the ground as his claws left deep grooves in the frozen soil to slow him down.

In front of him… the river of darkness was falling apart. The dark beetles, who had been acting like a single organism before, were now aimless and sluggish. Some grew lethargic or started burrowing into the ground, while others were wandering away. A few hundred were still pursuing him… with a thought, Sunny deactivated the Dying Wish and watched the small creatures dash away in fear.

The swarm ceased its purposeful advance and instead flowed outward, losing the shape of a giant tentacle of darkness. It was as though a tank of water had been broken, water spilling to the sides.

Utterly, chillingly exhausted, Sunny panted heavily inside the shadow shell. There were several beetles still crawling within it, stubbornly trying to bite through his skin. However, even their vicious bites had grown less determined.

'The breaking point… did they reach it?'

His tired mind wanted nothing more than to release the manifested shadows and let the Shadow Devil form crumble into nothingness, but he forced himself to remain vigilant.

Looking left and right, Sunny saw that the two neighboring swarms were in a similar condition. This was good news, but also bad… now that the Heart of Darkness was acting directionless, its deterrence seemed to have lost most of its power. The horde of Nightmare

Creatures, which had been scared away by the dark beetles, was already starting to tentatively move closer to the group of humans.

'Crap…'

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, then turned around and took a few steps toward the members of his cohort, who were similarly spent and battered.

His soldiers, however, recoiled away from him.

He looked down in confusion for a moment.

'Oh…'

With that, Sunny finally let the shadows comprising the Shadowspawn return to their natural form and flow back into the intricately engraved lantern hanging on the black silken cord tied around his waist. The towering four-armed devil suddenly crumbled into a cloud of darkness, and a pale young man in a beautiful black tunic stepped out of it with a stagger.

'Argh!'

Sunny fell to his knees, then raised his fist and angrily struck the ground several times, crushing the scurrying beetles.

"C—captain? Is that y—you?"

He glanced at Kim, who was staring at him with wide eyes.

"Of course, it's me. Who else would it be? And it's Major now, damn it…"

He slowly stood up and summoned the Endless Spring, taking several large gulps of cold, refreshing water.

Perhaps dismissing the Shadow Shell outside the city wall was not the wisest decision, but he felt that he would not be able to sustain it much longer. At least that way, he would have a tiny bit of essence left… for whatever it was that would happen next.

The wall…

Sunny looked back, finally witnessing the full scope of the damage done to the defensive barrier. The southern span of the wall was terribly deformed and broken, with many sections laying in giant piles of broken, melted alloy... much more of them than when he had left it. Somewhere beside it, hidden by the sea of abominations, the Awakened of the First Army was still holding the horde back.

He wondered how many of them were still alive.

'What is going on? Why did the Heart of Darkness suddenly… stop beating? Where the hell are…'

Shaken, he looked to his left, where Saint and Nightmare — and Soul Reaper's cohort — had fought.

His Shadows were already approaching, both littered with wounds. Neither had perished, but they did sustain a lot of damage. Even Saint, who was Transcendent, and thus much more durable than Sunny, had suffered dreadfully while battling the swarm of black beetles. Maybe because the small creatures were especially proficient at gnawing through stone…

The [Mantle of Darkness] was slow to repair the damage, as well, almost as if Saint's internal source of true darkness was as exhausted as Sunny's reservoir of essence. Her wounds were healing, nevertheless… just not at all as fast as he would have wanted.

There was one more figure making its way toward him, as well. Sunny felt extremely relieved when he recognized Jet.

Soul Reaper… did not look good. Her armor seemed to have been destroyed at some point during the battle, and now, she wore only the uniform bodysuit, its smart fabric wet and heavy with blood. Her face was ashen.

In a few heartbeats, all three arrived.

…In the same span of time, the Nightmare Creatures started to draw closer, madness and hunger burning in their eyes.

Sunny was the first one to speak:

"Master Jet? What happened? Why did the bugs suddenly…"

She staggered, forcing him to support her. Sunny and the members of his cohort looked at the leader of the Irregulars with concern.

Jet took a few raspy breaths, then said in a hoarse voice:

"I'm alright. It was Bloodwave… he fought his way to the center of the swarm, and killed the thing in charge."

Sunny blinked.

"What? How? And what exactly did he kill?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know."

It was only then that Sunny realized that Soul Reaper was alone. He hesitated for a moment, then asked:

"Your cohort?"

Jet gritted her teeth.

"...Dead."

Then, she pushed herself off of him and straightened.

"The Ascended that were supposed to reinforce us... are also dead. They couldn't fight their way through the horde. And speaking of the horde, we need to get the hell out of here, fast. We need to reach the secondary defense line really, really soon… otherwise, Army Command is probably going to blow us all up…"

Sunny froze for a moment.

'The… the Rampart Protocol…'

The First Army, of course, had all kinds of contingencies. There were a few set in place in case the city wall fell, too — from relatively

tame to really drastic.

The Rampart Protocol was the most drastic of them all.

There were tunnels dug below the killing field, and under the span of abandoned streets between the city wall and the secondary defense line, as well. All of them were chock-full of powerful explosives, most of them created with the use of spelltech.

All those explosives were set up to go up in flames together, turning everything outside the secondary barrier into a vast, scorching inferno.

That measure was only supposed to be implemented after every soldier had safely retreated into the safety zone… and most of them already had. Army Command would probably wait for Sunny, Jet, and especially Bloodwave to return before pulling the trigger.

But the situation was extremely chaotic, and communications were down. There was just no telling for sure.

'Damnation...'

Sunny glanced to his right and saw a battered Echo — the other two must have been destroyed — and a fearsome figure in sharkskin armor emerge from the mass of dark beetles and dash toward them.

Some distance behind the pair, a mass of abominations was already lunging forward.

He looked back at Jet and grinned.

"Then what the hell are we waiting for? Run!"

Chapter-1039: The Fall of Falcon Scott (57)

Bloodwave reached them just a moment later. The mighty Saint looked… spent. Sunny shivered when he noticed that his armor was torn, and there were ugly injuries covering his body. Out of the three Echoes, only the monstrous crab remained… the other two had either been destroyed or dismissed to save them from perishing.

'Even the Transcendent Echo is gone… gods. What could have destroyed one of those and severely injured a Saint? The Heart of Darkness… just what kind of creature was it?'

He felt a bit of dread, and a bit of curiosity. However, now was not the time to ask questions.

Their small party had to hurry and fight their way back through the boundless horde of Nightmare Creatures. Five Awakened, two Masters, one Saint… as well as two powerful Shadows and an Echo. They were an exceedingly formidable group.

Granted, all of them were wounded, tired, and low on essence. Still, cutting through the horde while keeping everyone alive would not pose a problem.

In theory.

Bloodwave studied the rest for a moment, then sent his Echo forward and growled, his voice husky, low, and domineering:

"Move!"

Saint spared the mighty Saint an indifferent glance, then mounted Nightmare and sent the dark destrier into a gallop, the spearhead of the Cruel Sight igniting with the incandescent white glow in her

hand, a shield made of pure darkness weighing on the other. They moved ahead of the party, cutting into the horde as a fierce vanguard.

Soul Reaper was just behind, accompanied by the members of Sunny's cohort. Bloodwave and his Echo flanked the Awakened, protecting them from the frenzied Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny himself took up the rear position, dragging his tired body along and preventing the abominations from attacking the backs of his soldiers.

In a cacophony of chilling howls, they dove into the mass of abominations. Blood, severed flesh, and fragments of broken bone instantly filled the air.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it…'

No one in the group was weak, and some of them were truly powerful. However, the horde that Goliath had brought to the walls of Falcon Scott was simply too vast. Countless Nightmare Creatures were throwing themselves at the exhausted humans in a rabid frenzy, every moment, from every direction. Slowing down meant being buried under a mountain of monstrous bodies and torn apart.

Their only chance was to cut through the mass of abominations faster than the abominations could pile up on them.

Sunny continued to fight with his teeth gritted. The rearguard position was the most awkward, because he had to move backwards at considerable speed while slaughtering the mass of Nightmare Creatures pursuing the party. By now, they were deep inside the horde, and the abominations were surrounding them on all sides.

With how sharp and swift the Sin of Solace was, no creature could resist its blade. Sunny was managing somehow, for now, but his battered body was hurting all over. Even though the Marble Shell had yet to succumb to an attack, the few blows he failed to dodge or deflect still delivered some damage.

It was only his skin that was as hard as stone, after all, not his entire

body. A sufficiently powerful strike would send a concussive shock through his insides, potentially causing internal organs to rupture. That hadn't happened yet… but being hit still hurt.

'What the hell… it just never ends, does it?'

Today, he had killed a titan and faced a creature that might have been even more wicked. Despite it all, the hard part was not over…

The fact that everything around him could blow at any moment, plunging the whole place into an inferno of immolating flame, both mundane and magical, did not make Sunny feel any better either.

Slowly, the ruined walls of the siege capital drew closer. Bloodwave's Echo was almost destroyed, causing the Saint to dismiss it — Master Jet took its place with a resigned expression, her wounds starting to bleed again. The somber glaive was nowhere to be seen, but a slender naginata appeared in Soul Reaper's hands instead.

Using it, she cleared the right flank of the formation with several vicious strikes.

The pressure on Sunny was also increasing. By now, he was forced to support himself with Shadow Manifestation from time to time — his already pitiful reserve of essence was diminishing even further with each use.

And yet, they continued to cut through the horde unimpeded, the ground slick with blood under their feet.

After what felt like a thousand years of slaughter, the party finally reached the melted ruin of the city wall.

In front of it, the Awakened force in charge of the southern section was holding back the ocean of Nightmare Creatures… what was left of it, at least. A grim expression settled on Sunny's face when he realized that of the initial seven hundred, perhaps only two hundred remained.

Reuniting with the line of Awakened soldiers gave them a moment of respite, and gave the desperate soldiers a much-needed morale boost.

Soul Reaper, Mongrel, and Devil… all three were famous champions of the First Army, and although few soldiers knew what Saint Bloodwave looked like, the Transcendent of the House of Night had a presence that made it impossible to mistake him for an ordinary person. Seeing them return alive from the sortie, the Awakened regained some of their spirit.

No one was out of the woods yet, though.

There was a large distance separating the wall from the secondary defense perimeter that had been established deep within the city. That whole abandoned area was set up to go up in flames, as well.

Sunny looked through one of the numerous breaches in the deformed wall, noticing that the staging area on the other side of it had already been evacuated. The mundane soldiers had retreated, taking the logistics personnel, medical officers, technicians, engineers, and all other non-combatants with them.

The vast resources stored inside the staging area were all left behind. Tall crates of MWP munitions, carcasses of slain Nightmare Creatures, loader robots, and so on… a wealth of supplies, much of it highly flammable or outright explosive, was going to be blown up once the Rampart Protocol was initiated, too.

Usually, Sunny would have been pained to see all these riches go to waste, but right now, he did not care.

All he cared about was not being near when they did.

Chapter-1040: The Fall of Falcon Scott (58)

'Right… now, we just have to get to the secondary defense line. Once we're within the city instead of on a plain, evading the abominations should be much easier, so the last stretch of the way won't be as hard.'

Sunny glanced at his companions, evaluating their state. Everyone was exhausted, dirty, and covered in blood — both their own and that of Nightmare Creatures — but alive.

The only problem now was to somehow extricate themselves, and the two hundred surviving Awakened, from the attacking horde.

At that moment, as if to answer his thoughts, Bloodwave turned to look at the mass of abominations. Then, the enigmatic Saint glanced at Master Jet.

"Take your soldiers and go, Soul Reaper. I will hold the beasts back for a bit… tell your commanders to activate the explosives as soon as you're past the defense line."

Sunny stared at him in shock, feeling that these words sounded a bit like... a farewell.

"You… you…"

Bloodwave gave him a strange look.

"Ah… I think you might have misunderstood, Sunless. I am not trying to sacrifice myself. It's just that an explosion like that won't harm a Transcendent too much. The Awakened, however, or even someone like you… better not risk it."

Sunny slowly nodded. Indeed… Corrupted Nightmare Creatures could survive a nuclear explosion without too much trouble, some Fallen as well. Rampart Protocol was not going to kill a Transcendent like Bloodwave, or even seriously inconvenience him.

Master Jet nodded.

"We'll be going, then."

The Saint nodded, then took a deep breath and started summoning several Memories. Sunny did not know what exactly the Memories were, but judging by the fact that Bloodwave had promised to hold back the horde… the whole horde… all by himself, the abominations were in for a nasty surprise.

Jet looked at him, then said quietly:

"Once we start running, don't stop until you're safely behind the army fortifications. I'll stay back a little, to make sure that everyone who is still alive gets safely out of the blast zone before Army Command begins the party. Expect to enjoy fireworks as soon as we see each other again."

Sunny forced out a pale smile.

"...It's going to be terribly loud, isn't it? Damn. My poor ears."

With that, he spared her one last glance and turned to his cohort.

"Come on! Go!"

Almost as soon as they dashed toward the nearest breach in the wall, Master Jet's voice boomed once again, spreading across the whole length of the battlefield.

"...Retreat!"

The surviving Awakened of the First Army did not make her ask twice. Delivering one last attack, they used their remaining strength to momentarily push the enemy back, then turned around and ran.

To call it a retreat was a bit of a stretch. There was no order or

strategy to it, just a desperate wish to survive. The defense line instantly collapsed, and the soldiers dove into the ruins of the city wall, their backs to the enemy.

The only saving grace of the whole thing was Bloodwave, who somehow managed to fulfill his promise and stall the enormous horde of Nightmare Creatures all by himself, at least for a few moments.

What happened outside the wall next, Sunny did not know. He thought that he heard the roar of a rushing tide of water, but at that point, there was no time to turn around.

Sunny and his cohort flashed through the abandoned staging area and escaped into the empty streets beyond.

Here, everything was shrouded in darkness. Many buildings had collapsed, creating a complicated labyrinth of snow and broken concrete. Others still stood, but were charred black by the flames. Some streets were strangely untouched and eerily empty, and of course, there were functioning roads that the First Army had maintained to deliver people and supplies to the wall.

Sunny led his people to one of these roads. Luckily, all of them could see in the dark thanks to Kim, so the lack of illumination was not a problem. Their running speed was not much lower than that of a moving PTV, but nevertheless, he felt a pang of regret for a moment.

'I'm going to lose the Rhino…'

His reliable APC was currently parked in a different section of the staging area, near where they had started their shift. Sadly, the battle had taken them far away from the main gate of the city, so there was no time to search for the mighty vehicle.

Once this whole place blew up, the Rhino would undoubtedly be destroyed, as well.

'Damn it! Damn it!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny continued to run. He had to lead his people to safety… that took priority over everything else.

Currently, they were slightly ahead of the rest of the retreating Awakened. The span of the southern section was very long, so no one else was in view. Right now, all that mattered was speed, and each soldier was making their own path to the secondary defense line.

Sunny suspected that most would try to reach the maintained roads, but on this one, there was no one but the battered cohort of Irregulars.

Burned and collapsed buildings flew past them one after another. They ran through the darkness, moving as fast as they could, their stamina long spent and their lungs burning. The dark, empty streets… something about them filled Sunny with a feeling of eerie unease.

It took him a couple of minutes to realize why the surroundings felt so strange. It was too quiet… after more than two weeks of the siege, Sunny had grown accustomed to always hearing the wall armaments roaring somewhere in the distance.

But those armaments had grown silent now, destroyed by the fiery gaze of Goliath. At least across the whole southern section of the defensive barrier, not a single turret was firing.

For some reason, the silence filled him with dread.

'Almost there… just a few more minutes…'

Sunny spread his shadow sense outward, just to make sure that there were no dangers around. He even sent two of his shadows to scour the path ahead, to be safe, and ordered Saint and Nightmare to stay alert.

But there was nothing there, just abandoned buildings and snow-covered ruins.

Sunny did not see anything that could pose a threat to the cohort.

His shadow did not see anything, either.

Neither did Nightmare and Saint.

…The only one to notice it was Luster, who just happened to turn his head in the direction the attack came from by pure luck.

His eyes widened.

It was a split second later that Sunny sensed it… a swift shadow flying toward the cohort, even though there was nothing there to cast it. But it was already too late for him to react.

In the next moment, Luster suddenly lunged forward and pushed Kim aside, throwing her to the ground. Something flashed through the cold air, and it was instantly filled with hot blood.

Chapter-1041: The Fall of Falcon Scott (59)

Something broke the dark surface of the shadows and flew into the cold air, moving fast enough to look like a black blur. Before anyone could react, Kim was falling down… and so was Luster, who had pushed her aside at the last moment. There was blood in the air, a startled expression on his face… and something was very wrong with the way he was falling…

The black blur did not stop. A sharp blade instantly flashed toward Dorn, who had a startled expression on his face. The giant man only had enough time to slightly turn his torso — the blade missed his heart, slicing through armor and leaving a deep wound on his chest.

The blade continued forward without pause, a split second away from piercing Belle's head. Instead, it simply passed through it… the swordsman could not possibly dodge, but he just barely managed to activate his Aspect Ability and phase through the strike.

Leaving Samara utterly open.

Everything happened too fast. Before Kim even hit the ground, the enemy's blade was already mere centimeters away from slashing across her throat.

…However, a jade sword suddenly appeared in its way, blocking the lightning-fast attack.

'What the…'

Sunny, who had thrown himself in the path of the enemy, was tossed back by the ferocious force of the impact. The attacker, whoever it was, was so strong that his hands grew slightly numb.

He collapsed on the scorched road and rolled, instantly jumping back to his feet.

Kim landed on the ground. Luster did, too… both of his legs were cleanly severed at the knee, and blood was pouring out of terrible wounds.

Sunny's eyes widened.

But he had no time to think about it. The members of the cohort were too slow to defend themselves, and the ambush was not yet over. The creature — a dark silhouette moving with dire speed — had been thrown back, as well. Sunny only had enough time to notice a humanoid shape clad in black armor, and instantly lunged forward.

He had regained his balance a split second faster than the attacker, so the bastard had no way to avoid being pierced by the Sin of Solace.

…And yet, that was exactly what happened.

Before the jade sword could strike the creature down, it simply dissipated into the shadows.

'What?'

Sunny was stupefied for a short moment.

'It's… it's Shadow Step.'

Which meant…

He spun, but was a moment too late. The creature was already behind him, the black blade falling from above.

Sunny gritted his teeth, then blocked the strike with his forearm. The Marble Shell turned as hard as stone… and split open, broken by the vicious strength of the blow. The blade only managed to deliver a relatively minor wound, though, most of its power spent to shatter the shell.

Before Sunny could counterattack, the enemy had blinked out of existence once again.

'Not good…'

The creature appeared some distance away, aiming to finish off Kim. At that point, however, Saint was already there. The taciturn knight had leapt from Nightmare's back and flashed across the road, deflecting the black blade with her shield.

Inconceivably, the onyx shield actually cracked, and the Shadow staggered back.

The creature did not waste any time and lunged toward Kim, but then…

A black chain suddenly wrapped around its throat.

A dozen meters away, Sunny grasped the shadow chain and jerked it back with all his strength.

The enemy was thrown back, flying through the air and crashing on the road a few meters behind him. The creature slid back, then stopped, kneeling in the middle of the road.

It remained motionless for a moment, and then slowly stood up, glancing at Sunny with cold killing intent.

Subjected to the hate-filled gaze, Sunny turned grim.

The creature was about two meters tall, with plates of jet-black bone covering its body like a full suit of armor. Even its face was hidden behind black bone, which formed a menacing closed helmet. Two inhuman dark eyes burned with resentment and hatred through the cracks.

The lower part of the helmet was split by a jagged line, and when it parted, a maw full of sharp fangs was revealed, opened in a mocking grin.

Sunny, who was standing between the cohort and the abomination, grimaced and lowered his gaze a little.

In one of its hands, the creature was holding a curved sword that seemed to have been crudely carved from a long black tusk, its edge

terribly sharp and harder than steel.

…Just as he had thought, the abomination was missing two fingers on the other.

Sunny sighed, lingered for a moment, and then said tiredly:

"I had a feeling that you would show up."

The scary stories about a murderous shadow that people in Falcon Scott had been telling each other turned out to be more than just stories, in the end.

It seemed that the little Scavenger had grown once again.

'Curse it…'

Of course, the wretched goblin would choose this exact moment to attack… why wouldn't he? Sunny was tired, beaten, and very low on essence. The First Army was in full retreat, and none of his allies could intervene on his behalf.

If Sunny was planning an ambush, that would have been exactly how he'd do it.

…Well, not quite. He would not have failed to kill most of his marks during the first assault.

Not letting the Scavenger out of his sight, Sunny briefly glanced at his soldiers.

Luster seemed to be in shock, weakly trying to sit up. Kim was by his side, hastily applying a tourniquet. Belle, Samara, and Dorn were shielding them with their bodies, their faces grim and tense… the latter was bleeding from a deep wound on his chest.

Saint and Nightmare were waiting for his command, ready to attack.

'Bad, bad… this is very bad…'

Sunny had already taken a glance at the Scavenger's soul, finding out that the damned waif had somehow managed to become a Corrupted

Devil. The goblin… well, the bastard was more of an ogre now… must have devoured a lot of Nightmare Creatures to become that strong.

He must have devoured a lot of people, as well, considering how disturbingly human-like the Scavenger now looked. There must have been a lot of bodies left in the ruins of Erebus Field… and more victims still here in Falcon Scott.

Much worse, it seemed that swallowing a piece of Sunny's flesh allowed the creature to inherit some of his powers.

Powers related to shadows.

Dealing with an enemy like that would have been hard even if the cohort was in peak shape, but now… it was going to be a problem. Not a big problem, of course…

However, one thing made the situation truly dire.

The whole section of the city around them — the road, the buildings, the ruins — was about to be destroyed by a titanic explosion.

Chapter-1042: The Fall of Falcon Scott (60)

For a few moments, no one moved. Sunny was considering how to deal with the Scavenger, while the Scavenger was probably considering how to deal with Sunny, now that the ambush had partially failed.

…Or maybe the damn thing was simply enjoying seeing him squirm. Who could tell what was happening in that abominable head?

A hundred thoughts flew through Sunny's mind. No matter how he looked at it, the situation did not look good. He had no doubt that he and his two Shadows were more than enough to kill the Scavenger… after all, plenty of Corrupted abominations had fallen by his hand. But would they be able to kill him fast enough?

The wretched creature was strong, and extremely slippery. Fighting someone who could teleport all over the place was a real nightmare… belatedly, Sunny felt pity for all the poor bastards whom he had killed in the past. They must have all died full of frustration.

'Serves them right…'

Once Army Command set off the explosives below the city, Saint would probably be able to survive the conflagration, just like Bloodwave had said he would. Nightmare and Sunny had a chance to escape unscathed, too, if they managed to find a shadow deep enough to protect them.

His soldiers, however, would not. They were not Saints, or even Ascended. Neither did they possess Aspects capable of saving them from the destruction. Not to mention that Luster was gravely injured and losing a lot of blood… as an Awakened, he would not bleed out immediately, but getting him to a medic, or better yet an actual

healer, was an urgent priority.

The problem was that Sunny was not confident in his ability to protect the cohort if they chose to retreat. Once again, an enemy who could step through shadows was simply too mobile and unpredictable… guarding a bunch of vulnerable targets from a Corrupted Devil who could appear at any moment, from any side, was a tall task.

'Damn it! Damn it! Not only did the bastard get a chunk of my flesh, he even became an utter menace because of it!'

They could not remain and fight, and they could not retreat.

Did the bastard actually know that everything around them was about to blow up? Or had he just been lucky to catch Sunny at the worst possible moment?

If he had, that was some luck...

The Scavenger tilted his head a little, as though challenging Sunny to come and get him. The tip of his curved saber lowered slightly, ready to lash out.

Sunny glared at him for a moment, then cursed silently and threw an order over his shoulder, his tone calm and steady:

"Kim… take Luster, climb onto my horse, and get the hell out of here. Get him help. The rest, retreat on foot. Saint will protect you."

Luster, who had been staring at his missing legs with a confused expression, looked up at the sound of his voice and asked shakily:

"Wha… what a—about you, Captain?"

Sunny grinned.

"I'll keep our friend here company. Don't worry… I did not survive Goliath and the Heart of Darkness to die to this little wretch today. Go!"

Kim was already dragging the young man toward Nightmare, her face

pale and full of desperate determination. The Scavenger spared them a glance, then stared back at Sunny.

His mouth opened… and a hoarse, grating voice suddenly came out of it:

"Die, today. Little… wretch."

Then, an ugly, gasping sound assaulted Sunny's ears.

The bastard was actually laughing.

Sunny frowned. He couldn't care less if the abomination wished to mock him, but nevertheless, his heart suddenly turned cold. Nightmare Creatures capable of speech were extremely rare… and all of them were extremely terrifying.

He could attest to that fact himself.

Sunny had already been uneasy, but now, his caution doubled. The Scavenger was dangerous. The little wretch had been abnormal from the very start. He was gaining power too fast, growing too explosively. Of course, Antarctica was a perfect place for a creature like that to gorge on the corpses of powerful monsters, but still…

Sunny's intuition was telling him that fighting the abomination alone would be a dire, dreadful mistake.

But he had no better choice.

He sighed with resignation.

'I guess my luck is just complete, utter crap today.'

Goliath, the Heart of Darkness, fighting his way back through the boundless Nightmare Creatures, and now this.

Sunny was hurt, tired, and miserable.

So much so, in fact, that he was getting a bit angry.

'Fine… fine, let's do this, you rotten piece of trash…'

There was a perfectly fine Nightmare Creature here to vent his anger.

Sunny had already failed to kill the Scavenger twice. Today, fate generously gave him a chance to finish the job, and he was not going to let it slip from his hands.

The Scavenger was strangely unreasonable in his hate-fueled pursuit, following Sunny all the way from LO49 across the hellscape of the Antarctic Center.

Well, Sunny could be an unreasonable person himself.

In fact, he was very tired of being reasonable all the time.

'Enough is enough…'

A dark, slightly mad light ignited in his eyes.

Behind him, Kim pushed Luster onto Nightmare's back, then jumped up herself. The black steed instantly shot forward, moving across the empty road with incredible speed. Belle, Dorn, and Samara followed, protected by Saint.

All that remained was Sunny, the Scavenger, and the shadows.

…And tons of explosives somewhere beneath their feet.

The menacing black abomination moved, trying to dissipate into the shadows, but before it could, the shadows around it suddenly surged, shooting forward like sharp spikes.

The spikes shattered against the creature's bone armor, but they did slow him down for a split second.

And that was all that Sunny needed.

Emerging from the darkness in front of the Scavenger, he kicked him in the chest. With a deafening boom, the creature was sent flying back, but managed to land on his feet. The black tusk whistled, tearing through the air, and collided against the white jade of the Sin of Solace.

Sunny felt his hand tremble from the force of the blow, and smiled.

'Good, good… don't you die too easily…'

Chapter-1043: The Fall of Falcon Scott (61)

On the doomed streets of a snow-covered city, surrounded by ruins of collapsed buildings and remnants of devastating battles, a young man with alabaster skin and onyx hair was fighting a wraith made of darkness and hatred. One wore a simple tunic of beautiful black silk, the other was clad in menacing black armor. Both moved through the ruins like a pair of swift shadows.

'Damn it… break!'

Sunny shuddered as he deflected a vicious strike of the mysterious black tusk, felt the impact send a painful jolt through his entire body, and guided the enemy's blade to the side. At the same time, he took a step forward and slammed his elbow into the Scavenger's chest.

The creature was pushed back, releasing the Sin of Solace from the bind. The cursed sword instantly flashed forward, slashing across the abomination's side… the defense, counterattack, and follow-up had been executed flawlessly, flowing into each other like the nimble steps of a graceful dance. Despite being light and swift, they also carried tremendous power and annihilating intent.

And yet, the white jade slid fruitlessly off the black bone armor, barely leaving a scratch on it.

'What the hell are you made of, bastard?!'

The Scavenger… was just too damn overbearing.

At times, fighting him was like fighting water — when the Sin of Solace lashed out at the cracks in the bone armor, the Scavenger would turn into a shadow, allowing the jade blade to harmlessly pass through. Other times, fighting him was like fighting against an

indestructible mountain — the plates of black bone seemed utterly impervious, and the creature's blows carried with them crushing weight.

Even compared to the Corrupted creatures Sunny had faced, the Scavenger was abnormally powerful. He was so strong that it did not even make sense… the Sin of Solace had come from the Remnant of the Jade Queen, an astonishingly dreadful Corrupted Tyrant, and had an enchantment that bestowed it with unparalleled sharpness as well.

What kind of indestructible creature had the vengeful goblin devoured to be able to resist its edge?!

It seemed as though there were peerless geniuses even among the Nightmare Creatures… and the pathetic, tiny imp Sunny had failed to kill many months ago just so happened to be one of those.

'Just my luck...'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny braced himself and received another blow of the black tusk. Another bloodless wound appeared on his body — none of them were deep enough to be dangerous, but the damage was slowly mounting.

Worst of all, he was completely suppressed.

There were countless ways for Sunny to kill the hateful fiend. For example, if the sharpness of the Sin of Solace itself was not enough, he could augment the power of the jade blade manifold with his shadows. He could manifest wild shadows, as well, forming chains, swords, or tentacles to attack and entangle the Scavenger. He could use Shadow Step to keep up with the damned ogre…

But he was prevented from doing any of these things.

Sunny could not afford to augment his sword, because he needed the shadows to match the Corrupted Devil's speed and strength — and even then, the Scavenger was faster and stronger. He could not wantonly use Shadow Manifestation, because his reserves of essence were nearly empty. The same went for Shadow Step, or any other trick he could come up with on the spot.

The bastard had known just when to attack. He had only shown himself when Sunny was at his weakest, and now, Sunny was forced to defend himself against a Nightmare Creature of a superior Rank while being robbed of most of his powers. Even those that remained were countered, because the Scavenger possessed the same ones.

Sunny could not really blame the abomination for setting such a wicked trap, though, because it had been precisely how he himself had slayed many powerful adversaries.

'Doesn't matter… I'll still kill you… you're going to die no matter what…'

Sunny's eye burned with cold fury as he released the hilt of the Sin of Solace, switching to a one-hand grip. The great jian was the same length as a longsword would have been, but incredibly light and swift. Although it could not hack and slash with the same ferocious power as the Scavenger's black blade, it was far more nimble and versatile.

Sunny seamlessly switched to a more agile and reserved battle style, summoning the Cruel Sight into his free hand in the form of a shortsword. The silver sword's [Ghost Blade] enchantment allowed it to strike down incorporeal targets… and so, the Scavenger was in for an unpleasant surprise the next time he chose to turn into a shadow.

If there was one advantage Sunny had, it was his skill and experience. The Scavenger was tremendously powerful, cunning, and possessed a truly vicious, murderous will… he had devoured a great number of mighty creatures, and grown with explosive speed.

The bastard was supremely devious and surprisingly intelligent, enough to survive and even thrive in the hellish meat grinder of the Chain of Nightmares.

But he was still an abomination, and a young one at that. His attacks were smart and powerful, but also clumsy and crude — just like the makeshift saber he was using, which had obviously been fashioned from some dreadful monstrosity's tusk. For now, the Scavenger was able to suppress Sunny simply because of his timing and vastly superior physical might.

But he was not nearly as experienced of a killer…

As for spite and viciousness, both had them in spades.

'Die!'

As soon as the Cruel Sight manifested itself, Sunny blocked the black tusk with the jade sword and then struck with the silver one, aiming at the elbow of the abomination's right arm — no matter how tough an armor was, it had to be weaker at the joints to allow for enough flexibility. And indeed, there was a gap between two bone plates there.

In truth, Sunny was not sure if the Cruel Sight could cut even the weaker parts of the Scavenger. However, the creature did not know that…

Just as expected, the vicious fiend chose not to risk it. The shadow powers he possessed were, strangely, both superior and inferior to Sunny's — as of yet, the abomination had only shown the ability to use a form of Shadow Step.

That ability, however, was more insidious than the original, allowing the creature to not only teleport and turn incorporeal, but even selectively turn only parts of himself into shadow.

And so, the body of the Scavenger remained perfectly material, continuing to pressure Sunny with dreadful strength, while the middle of his right arm became ghostly and incorporeal.

The Cruel Sight passed through the abomination's elbow without meeting any resistance, never even touching his flesh.

However, the Scavenger suddenly staggered and let out a pained hiss, causing a vicious grin to appear on Sunny's face.

The silver blade might not have cut the creature's flesh, but it did cut his shadow. Which was the same as cutting someone's soul…

The damaged span of the fiend's arm instantly turned back to flesh and bone, but the damage was already done. Using the momentary lapse in the Scavenger's awareness, Sunny lunged forward and

tangled with him, pushing them both to the ground.

Fighting a slippery shadow... was really a nightmare. He had far less essence to spare, giving the hateful fiend a vital advantage — unlike Sunny, the Scavenger could use Shadow Step as much as he wanted, avoiding attacks and launching his own from unexpected directions. The abomination could even escape, if he wished.

…However, it would not be able to do anything if Sunny was clutching it with his own two hands.

As the two hit the ground, he growled and grasped the Scavenger's throat, constricting it with enough force to shatter armored alloy. Sunny's eyes were shining with dark, malicious joy.

If he could not break the bastard's armor… he would just strangle him! Most Nightmare Creatures still had to breathe, after all. Even if the Scavenger didn't, a broken neck was bound to solve something.

It was strangely fitting, actually. Sunny had killed his first abomination by strangling it with a chain.

And now, he was going to squeeze the life out of this Corrupted Devil, too!

Chapter-1044: The Fall of Falcon Scott (62)

'Die, die, die…'

Sunny kept trying to strangle the Scavenger in a strange reversal of their previous encounter. His face was contorted into a bestial snarl, and his eyes were burning with indescribable bloodlust.

The Scavenger, however, was not easily killed. At first, he seemed to have panicked and tried to throw Sunny off himself, but after realizing that getting rid of the small human was all but impossible, the abomination calmed down, stared at him with seething hatred, and tried to stab him in the back with the black tusk.

The tip of the crude saber bit into the silk of the Graceless Dusk, and failed to pierce it.

Sunny laughed with savage joy.

"Try harder, bastard!"

The Scavenger obliged.

Dropping the tusk, he grabbed Sunny by the collar… and, instead of trying to push him away, instead pulled him down. The two of them were suddenly face-to-face.

'Crap…'

The jagged line splitting the abomination's helmet opened, and countless sharp fangs instantly sank into Sunny's cheek.

"Aaaaaargh!"

Realizing that he was moments from having his face bitten off, Sunny

let go of the fiend's neck and delivered a vicious punch into his solar plexus. Then, he grabbed the creature's jaws, pushed them open by a few millimeters, and staggered back.

The Scavenger once again let out a hoarse, hateful laugh, his teeth painted by Sunny's blood.

Sunny landed awkwardly on his backside and grabbed his cheek. The right side of his face was all torn, but at least he did not lose an eye. Sadly, he already knew that the Scavenger's teeth were poisoned…

'You horrid wretch!'

Grabbing the Sin of Solace, Sunny lunged forward to strike down the fiend before he stood up. However, the creature simply turned into a shadow instead, trying to flee and then launch a surprise attack from a random direction.

"Not so fast!"

Without ever slowing down, Sunny dove into the shadows, too.

In the dark realm of shadows, the shapeless form that was the Scavenger was swiftly flying away, and the shapeless form that Sunny pursued. All of the abandoned area was shrouded in darkness, so they could travel as far as they wanted, unimpeded.

The Scavenger… as a shadow creature of the Corrupted Rank, here, he was vast and dreadful, much more so than Sunny.

And yet, Sunny held an absolute advantage.

He had fought as a shadow before, a couple of times, and was all but helpless each time. But Sunny had been a mere Child of Shadows then. Now, he was their Master.

He had gained plenty of insight into shaping shadows thanks to Shadow Control, Shadow Manifestation… and especially his recent breakthrough, which he decided to name Shadow Shell.

And since he was currently a shadow, too…

Closing in on the fleeing Scavenger, Sunny willed his shapeless body to change. Instantly, it came to possess four long, powerful arms. Then, sharp claws grew out of his fingers.

Knowing that he didn't have a lot of essence left, and thus wouldn't be able to remain a shadow for long, Sunny did not waste any time and tore into the formless abomination. Instantly, it was as though a soundless wail of pain spread through the dark space.

The Scavenger seemed both surprised and aggrieved by the fact that Sunny was able to hurt him in this realm, which he must have considered absolutely safe before. Frightened, he tried to fight back, launching powerful but awkward attacks of his own.

A familiar, sickening pain of having his soul damaged permeated Sunny's senses. He had sustained some damage, too… but not nearly as much as the damned goblin. Partially because the creature's blows were rudimentary and crude, and partially because his soul was protected by the Marble Shell.

The Scavenger realized that his struggles were not having any effect, either. Escaping Sunny's cruel claws, he instantly escaped the shadows and emerged into the world above.

They rolled through the ruins, exchanging a series of blows. Sunny received several more wounds, but the hateful fiend… his armor was still as impenetrable as ever!

'Curse you! What do I have to do for you to finally die, damn it?!'

Infuriated, Sunny grabbed the towering ogre and smashed through the wall of a building, using the creature's body as a ram. Of course, that was not going to be of any use… a Corrupted Devil could crash through a mountain, and still walk away without anything more than a couple bruises.

Behind the wall, there was a slope of charred rubble. They fell down, ending up in a shallow pit.

At some point, Sunny had lost his swords, and the creature had lost its black saber. The two of them stared at each other for a moment,

both full of murderous rage.

…Then, however, the Scavenger's gaze changed slightly.

Sunny's face changed, too.

That was because he felt a slight tremor spreading through the ground beneath them. His eyes widened.

'Hell…'

In front of him, the battered fiend suddenly recoiled, trying to escape into the shadows once again — this time, he was going to simply blink away instead of traveling through the dark realm.

But Sunny had other plans.

"Where do you think you're going?!"

Grabbing the abomination by the shin, he dragged him back, and then pressed the bastard into the ground. A series of painful blows rained on Sunny's already cut and injured body, but he just held the ogre tighter.

"What, are you afraid to die?! Let's die... let's die together!"

The Scavenger, despite all his sharp intelligence, was really too naive. The explosion was not going to harm a Corrupted Devil… however, the creature did not know that. He had only gained full sentience a few short months ago, after all.

Sunny laughed, then used all but a few drops of his remaining essence to call upon the shadows. They surged forth, encasing the two of them in a sphere. Then, more shadows rose, creating a second layer around the black egg, and then the third.

Sunny could have tried to escape the blast by turning incorporeal… however, there had to be a shadow for him to remain in that state. Once this whole area blew to smithereens, everything would be flooded with light. The shadows would be banished, and he would be thrown back into the material world.

So, he created this egg, trapping the two of them inside.

Maybe it was even sturdy enough to resist.

"Wretch… one way or the other... you're going to die today!"

He continued to hold the Scavenger and pummel him with his free hand, feeling the skin on his knuckles splitting despite being reinforced by the Marble Shell. The bone armor of the abomination, nevertheless, refused to crack.

The Scavenger fought back desperately, too.

They were surrounded by darkness, the world outside hidden by the walls of the black sphere.

That was why Sunny did not see the Rampart Protocol coming into effect to obliterate a vast swath of the city, the remains of the wall, and the killing field beyond.

…However, he did feel it.

Chapter-1045: The Fall of Falcon Scott (63)

In the tunnels under the abandoned section of the city and the vast killing field beyond the devastated wall, countless explosives simultaneously received a signal to detonate. To prevent the interference of the nearby Gates from influencing the execution of the scorched-earth protocol, all of them were connected into a labyrinthine network by simple, but reliable wires.

Even though the signal traveled through the wires with astronomical speed, there was still a slight delay between the detonation of those explosives that were nearest to the ramparts of the secondary defense line and those furthest away from them.

At first...

From afar, it looked as though a ripple had spread through the ground, moving outward. It rolled through the ruined streets of the city, with countless fountains of dust shooting up between the rubble. Some of the buildings that had withstood the furious fighting started to collapse, some seemed to have burst apart.

The vanguard of the horde of Nightmare Creatures had already entered the city, racing through these streets. They met the ripple first and were thrown to the ground.

Then, the ripple reached the towering wall, destroying even more of its sections. The mass of alloy was only starting to fall, surrounded by the deafening groan of tearing metal, by the time the ripple moved past the mountainous corpse of the slain titan in the field beyond and exhausted itself. Now, the whole horde had been encompassed by the destruction zone.

All of it took no more than a couple of seconds.

For a moment, everything was still…

And then, the ground started to fall.

A vast swath of earth many kilometers across slowly started to cave in, as if forming a giant crater. Now that it was completely untethered, none of the buildings survived — all of them toppled and fell apart, devoured by the gargantuan landslide. The remains of the city wall were utterly destroyed, too.

However, the true devastation was yet to come.

As the inconceivable mass of soil sank down, it seemed to have reached a point of strange equilibrium… and then suddenly exploded upward in a furious conflagration. It was as though a giant bubble swelled from under it, and then burst open, unleashing a titanic pillar of flame into the cold winter sky.

For a moment, the night turned as bright as day.

Then, the roaring thunder of the explosion washed over the world, making the skies themselves shake. A billowing cloud of dust and debris rose high into the air, obscuring the ocean of flames bursting from under the ground. A second terrifying blast resounded when the munition depots spread across the staging area below the wall detonated under the assault of heat, concussive force, and pressure.

The horde of Nightmare Creatures was consumed by the obliterating havoc. The weakest of them were instantly killed, while the stronger ones were severely wounded and burned. Only the strongest ones managed to survive the initial conflagration unscathed.

In less than a minute, a gigantic area was utterly devastated, turning into an incandescent pit of fire, molten rock, and liquified metal. The furious sight of it all, up until the world had become obscured by dust, was both awe-inspiring and horrifying.

The soldiers standing on the ramparts had long fallen down and covered their ears, but even then, they could feel the terrible destruction through the violent tremors of the earth.

…Sunny, however, had first-row seats to the cataclysmic detonation.

After all, he was stuck in the middle of it.

'Die, die! Die, bastard!'

Trapped inside the sphere of shadows, he held the Scavenger down while pummeling him with his fist. Each of his blows would have been powerful enough to utterly wreck an armored APC like the Rhino, but the black bone armor of the shadow fiend simply refused to break.

The longer it endured, the more furious he became.

'Just die, damn it!'

The sphere of darkness around them suddenly shuddered, briefly rising, then plummeting down. A violent tremor ran through its walls, and up suddenly became down — it seemed that the shadow egg was rolling and being thrown around.

Sunny, who had been on top of the fiercely resisting Scavenger, found himself falling for a brief second. He hit the roof of the sphere, and a moment later, the hateful ogre came crashing down, as well, landing on him. A massive fist connected with the side of Sunny's head, making him see stars.

'Curse... it…'

However, the abomination could not press his advantage, because the shadow egg was flipped upside down once again a split second later… and then again, and then again, and then again.

The two of them were being tossed inside the sphere, ricocheting off its walls like rubber balls. Sunny almost instantly gave up on trying to comprehend where the up and down were, and simply concentrated on holding onto the Scavenger — as soon as he let go, the creature would be able to slip away through Shadow Step.

But as long as he did not let go… he could continue to try and kill the wretch…

'Die!!!'

Just as he was going to deliver another punch, a sharp pain pierced his shoulder. The dazed Scavenger had finally given up on trying to free himself from the mad human, and also on trying to meet him blow for blow — instead, he instinctively retreated to what he knew best.

Tearing things apart with his teeth.

'Argh, let go of me, you rotten piece of trash!'

Sunny had already had some poison coursing through his veins, but now, there was more…

Before he could do anything, however, the world suddenly shook, and a vicious shockwave traveled through the sphere. It felt as though all his organs had changed places…

But the next shudder was indescribably more violent.

Sunny thought that he had blacked out for a moment, but maybe he didn't. He growled and used both of his hands to grab the Scavenger, afraid to lose the grip. With no free hand to continue hitting the creature, he then proceeded to headbutt the bastard with all his strength.

Finally, Sunny felt something crack under his assault.

However, it might have been his own nose… it was hard to tell…

The world was shaking, burning, and consisted of pain.

Having gone completely berserk, Sunny paid it no attention and continued to use everything at his disposal to break the damned Scavenger, while the Scavenger continued to bite and rip his flesh apart with sharp fangs. The creature's armor would not break… but neither would the human's body.

In fact, his skin was harder than the hide of most abominations the fiend had devoured in the past, while his bones were ten times tougher than that.

What kind of ridiculous human was that?!

The air inside the sphere was permeated by unbearable heat, and it seemed as though its walls were starting to glow a dull red. Then, a crack appeared on the black surface…

Consumed by boundless bloodlust, the two continued to fight.

Chapter-1046: The Fall of Falcon Scott (64)

At some point, Sunny had to admit that he was not going to break the Scavenger's armor, but he still continued to deliver a barrage of vicious blows to the hateful creature — he refused to believe that the fiend was as tough on the inside. No matter how hard the shell was, enough force was bound to turn everything protected by it into bloody mush.

He suffered from the same weakness himself, after all…

But no matter how much he struck the damned ogre, the Scavenger did not seem too bothered by it.

'Goddammit!'

Desperate and enraged, Sunny grabbed the creature's jaw with one hand, and used the other to constrict the abomination's arm. Then, he opened his mouth…

And bit into the Scavenger's flesh himself.

Maybe Sunny was lucky, or maybe the bone armor in that spot had actually been weakened by his previous strikes… regardless, he finally felt something give, and then tasted a despicably foul taste on his tongue. It was the Scavenger's blood.

…Sunny had never tasted anything sweeter in his entire life.

Feeling the creature shudder and frantically try to push him away, he pressed his teeth deeper with wicked glee, and then tore a chunk of flesh away. Sunny spat it out and grinned, then instantly regretted it when a massive fist flashed forward and hit him in the face with horrid strength.

'Ah…'

Sunny was thrown back.

And at the same time, the black sphere finally broke.

All three layers of protective shadows had been thoroughly damaged, and now reached their limit. A net of cracks spread through the egg, and then it collapsed into numerous shards, exposing both Sunny and the Scavenger to terrible heat and blinding light.

'Crap…'

The world shuddered one last time.

The world…

Was hot.

But at least it finally stopped spinning.

Sunny found himself staring into a glowing orange fog.

The fog was pretty, and smelled of fire.

'...I think I'm on fire.'

He raised his head, and noticed flames licking his legs. Luckily, his elemental resistance was high enough to resist them. The Graceless Dusk, too, was not affected by them at all. The black silk was pleasantly cool.

'Right…'

The orange fog was just dust illuminated by a sea of flames. Sunny was laying on the ground, surrounded by rubble and debris. Some of it was incandescent, and there were puddles of melted metal here and there. It looked like a scene from a fiery hell.

He was hurting all over, and breathing was strangely hard… but he was alive.

With a groan, Sunny slowly sat up, and then stood up with a stagger.

He did not feel well. He was dreadfully exhausted, heavily wounded, and poisoned on top of that. As for the Scavenger…

Sunny looked around and gritted his teeth.

'Don't tell me that the bastard escaped again!'

He allowed his shadow sense to spread outward, then smiled.

Limping away, he circled a pile of burning debris and stopped near the edge of a deep impression in the ground.

The impression was about three meters deep, and had almost vertical slopes. On its bottom, the Scavenger was trapped under a giant piece of broken alloy. The creature seemed to be slightly dazed, but otherwise unscathed. In fact, the abomination was already trying to lift the alloy, which was groaning under the strain.

He couldn't escape into the shadows, because everything around them was brightly illuminated by the flames and the glowing fog. There was no shadow large enough for the fiend to dive into.

For the moment, the creature was defenseless.

…The problem was that Sunny had no strength left to fight. Even when he had been able to, all his efforts failed to break through the Scavenger's impregnable armor. All he managed to do was make the creature bleed a little by biting it.

And he had only a few drops of essence left.

Soon, the damned wretch was going to free himself and flee… or maybe even attack Sunny, who was barely able to stand, and finish him off.

Sunny was in a real stalemate.

He rubbed his face, stared at the struggling Scavenger for a few long moments, and then used the last drops of his essence to summon a Memory.

The creature glanced at Sunny with hatred, then redoubled his efforts

to get free. With the power of a Corrupted Devil, getting rid of a piece of alloy, no matter how heavy, should not have been a problem… but the Scavenger was dazed and tired, too. On top of that, he was severely weakened by having his soul ripped by Sunny's claws. It was going to take him a dozen or so seconds to escape, at least.

The fiend appeared to relax a little, though, when he noticed that the Memory his enemy summoned was not a sword or a bow… instead, it was a seemingly inconspicuous alloy chest.

Sunny sighed, then smiled coldly.

"...Here, bastard. Eat this."

With that, he opened the lid of the Covetous Coffer and kicked it, throwing the chest on its side.

A flood of small, black beetles poured into the deep pit from the bottomless black square of the Coffer's maw.

They landed on the Scavenger, instantly biting into the bone armor. Where Sunny's weapons failed, the sharp mandibles of the dark vermin were similarly ineffective… however, there were countless thousands of them, and not all of the abomination's towering body was covered by armor. There were cracks… there were gaps… there were ways to get inside.

The fiend frantically tried to escape, but it was already too late. His figure became covered by a crawling carpet of beetles, and then he was buried under their mass entirely. More and more vermin poured from the Covetous Coffer, until the pit was filled almost to the brim. No trace of the Scavenger remained under the seething mass of tiny creatures.

Sunny took a step back, and then drew in a deep breath.

Then, he let out a strange, shaky laugh.

'I did it!'

Sunny's laugh turned louder.

'What is it with me and shadow creatures… every time I fight one, I'm driven to the very edge of madness… and then a little bit past that…'

As he was laughing, the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear:

[You have slain a Corrupted Devil…]

He was so startled that he even missed the later half.

'What?'

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Instantly, Sunny felt a flood of shadow fragments pour into his soul… tens, or even hundreds of times more than what he was supposed to receive for killing a Corrupted Devil.

As his eyes widened, the Spell spoke once more:

[...You have received an Echo.]

Chapter-1047: The Fall of Falcon Scott (65)

The battle was over.

…It was over for the Irregulars, at least. The fresh soldiers pulled from the other sections of the wall were still fighting on the ramparts of the secondary defense line, but with the Heart of Darkness and Goliath destroyed, and the boundless horde of Nightmare Creatures decimated by the titanic explosion, the siege was reduced to the usual stream of chaotic, relatively small-scale skirmishes.

The spine of the assault had been broken. Falcon Scott had faced the most dreadful battle yet, and endured.

For the most part.

The southern area of the city was entirely destroyed, replaced by a gargantuan crater. The buildings were gone, and a long span of the great wall was gone, too. Even most of the killing field beyond was erased from existence, with only the towering stone corpse of the slain titan remaining intact.

It just lay on the slope of the crater like a mountain-sized pile of rubble, filling the hearts of the soldiers who saw it with dark glee.

With the collapse of the wall, defending the city had become much harder. However, the crater formed a natural barrier of its own — even though the secondary ramparts were not nearly as tall or formidable, they still gave the First Army a chance to resist the attacks of Nightmare Creatures.

More than that, four out of the five direst threats to the siege capital were now eradicated. The Devouring Cloud, the Terror of LO49, the Heart of Darkness, and Goliath… despite the terrible price the First

Army had to pay, they were dead. Now, only the most powerful of the horrors remained. The Corrupted Titan, Winter Beast.

But it was being contained by Sky Tide of the White Feather clan, so…

For the first time since the start of the siege, the people of Falcon Scott felt hopeful.

They were shaken and terrified, too, but with countless millions of refugees already evacuated, and so many powerful abominations slain, it was no longer impossible to imagine the end of this bloody affair.

Falcon Scott only had to hold for a handful more days…

The ghostly flames of the aurora burned above the ravaged city, and the moon had hidden itself in the cold darkness of the night sky.

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Sunny was sitting in the familiar conference room of the government complex. Rather, he was sprawled on the chair, staring at the ceiling with a detached expression. His skin had healed, turning into a surreal painting of black bruises, but the internal damage remained. Even with his incredible healing speed, he still felt terribly hurt.

That was because he had been… the Scavenger had done a number on him, especially near the end of their murderous clash. Nevertheless, the hateful fiend was dead, and Sunny was not. He had even received an Echo, and a great number of shadow fragments.

Unexpectedly, the Spell had chosen to count the black beetles, who were not living beings, as a weapon of his. Therefore, after the appalling creatures had devoured the Scavenger, it rewarded Sunny for the kill.

He was currently looking at the runes with dull eyes.

'What to do… what to do…'

Two strings of shimmering symbols were at the center of his

attention.

Shadow Fragments: [3857/4000].

And:

Echoes: [Ravenous Fiend].

The Scavenger… Ravenous Fiend… had been a weird abomination. He had obviously assumed some qualities of a shadow creature, but not all of them. Otherwise, the bastards would have turned into a Shadow instead of an Echo.

Or maybe the issue was that the Scavenger's soul was corrupted, and thus unsuited to directly become a Shadow… in any case, as a result, Sunny had received almost eight hundred shadow fragments for killing the abomination, as well as a Transcendent Echo.

The Ravenous Fiend had been a top tier Nightmare Creature, a peerless genius of vile abominations, so turning him into a Shadow was an easy decision. Having two Transcendent Shadows would be a tremendous boost to Sunny's power, too.

However… there were two problems.

The first one was the Echo itself. When Sunny summoned it in the Soul Sea, he had expected to see a towering ogre clad in unbreakable bone armor… but what appeared instead was a pitiful, tiny gremlin! The Ravenous Fiend was no fiend at all… it was an imp, at best.

The imp was still a Transcendent Devil, but weak beyond belief. His true power lay in a rather insane ability to grow stronger and acquire new traits by devouring various creatures or things. He also possessed a few very surprising and potent Attributes.

If Sunny carefully chose a rich diet for the little bastard, in time, the imp could potentially grow stupidly powerful — even more powerful than he had been after devouring random trash across the Antarctic Center. But that would only be in the future, and right now, transforming the Echo into a Shadow would cost him no less than three hundred shadow fragments.

Three hundred fragments was not a terribly large amount… except he was on the verge of becoming a Tyrant now.

Dismissing the runes, Sunny sighed.

'Later. Now is not a good time.'

It was, indeed, not a good time… in more than one sense.

Suddenly reminded of something, Sunny somberly looked around.

There were only two people in the conference room — himself and Master Jet. Winter's seat was empty.

…That was because Winter was dead.

She had died while holding back the horde of Nightmare Creature, when the section of the wall under her cohort collapsed.

A great number of people had died that day. Thousands of mundane soldiers had perished, and of the seven hundred Awakened, only about two hundred survived. Winter and her Irregulars had been wiped out, too. Even Soul Reaper's own cohort had been destroyed, leaving her the sole survivor.

Sunny stared at the empty seat, feeling a dull pain in his heart. Winter… the two of them had not known each other for long, but there was a bond between them. He liked the brash Master a lot. And now, she was gone… just like that… and he had not even gotten a chance to say goodbye.

All of them were gone… Randall, Jesse, Davis, Dale, and now Winter, too. He could still vividly remember their first meeting, when the First Irregular Company was officially established.

A few months later, there were just Sunny and Master Jet left. Of the forty-two Awakened Irregulars, only four remained — Belle, Dorn, Samara, and Kim. Luster was alive, too, but for him, the war was most likely over.

'Damn it all…'

Sunny studied the empty room, a strange, dark, burning emotion rising in his chest.

'What is the damn point? What is the point of it all?'

Soul Reaper and he were supposed to be having a strategy meeting right now, but there was nothing really for them to discuss.

After some time spent in silence, Jet suddenly shook her head and stood up, accidentally sending her chair flying into the wall. She stared at it in confusion, then cursed.

"...We're just wasting time here. Go rest, Sunny… you deserve a break. Gods, we all do…"

With that, Jet picked up the chair, placed it near the conference table, and walked out without saying a word.

Sunny was left alone in the empty room.

He remained motionless for a while, then sighed and stood up.

'Less than a week left, now. We'll all be able to rest, soon…'

Chapter-1048: The Fall of Falcon Scott (66)

Sunny left the underground complex, breathed in the cold winter air, and limped toward the nearby army hospital. The walk was not too long, so he reached it within ten minutes.

Belle, Dorn, and Samara were in front of the building, and so was Abomination — the Echo was laying on the ground, shielding them from the wind with its massive body.

The hound had not participated in the recent battle, because it would have been destroyed too quickly by the black beetles. It had been very helpful to the cohort in the past two weeks, though.

It was strange… in the past, Abomination had mostly ignored Quentin's Echo, Blackie, who used to follow the larger beast around. But now that Blackie was gone, the monstrous hound always looked a bit forlorn.

Sparing the Echo a sad glance, Sunny approached his soldiers.

"Major! Gods… you look awful!"

Belle grinned, hiding hints of anguish that had taken root in his eyes.

Sunny forced out a smile, as well.

"You should have seen the other guy… ah, but you can't. I killed the other guy."

That produced a few chuckles. Sunny scoffed, too.

"Anyway. Take me to Luster… he's awake, right?"

They nodded. Dorn and Samara remained outside, while Belle guided

him into the hospital.

"He woke up an hour or so ago. Uh… I think he's in good spirits, considering. That might be because of painkillers, though."

They walked through the white corridors, which were all crowded with hospital beds. An uncountable number of maimed and injured soldiers lay on them, some awake, some mercifully unconscious. The air was filled with the sickening smell of blood, burned flesh, misery, and despair.

Doctors, nurses, and a few Awakened healers were hurriedly tending to the wounded, the bags under their eyes blacker than the bruises covering Sunny's body.

The sight of it was indescribably grim.

Sunny kept his face cool, projecting the image of an intrepid Ascended. On the inside, however…

'At least they'll survive.'

Modern medicine was very potent, and that was without even considering the Awakened wielding healing Aspects. If a soldier was delivered from the battlefield alive, there was very little chance of them dying. The only problem was the cost, but the First Army spared no expense, at least in that regard.

As an Awakened of somewhat exalted status, Luster was placed in a small room of his own. As they approached it, Sunny heard the young man's voice:

"Kim… Kimmy… stop it… I lost my legs, you know, not my hands! I am perfectly capable of feeding myself!"

When they entered, they saw a peculiar scene. Luster was laid on a bed, his stumps wrapped in regenerative bandage, while Kim was trying to push a spoonful of synthpaste porridge into his mouth. The young woman's usually timid face was determined and extremely focused.

Noticing Sunny, Luster grinned:

"Cap… Major! Thank the gods! Please, save me!"

Kim froze, then turned and gave Sunny an unexpectedly fierce look.

"Sir. That fool refuses to eat."

Sunny stared at them for a couple of moments, and smiled.

"Do you want me to feed you, Luster? Because, you know… I can…"

The young man paled a little, then hurriedly grabbed the spoon and swallowed the porridge in one go.

"No, no. No need to exert yourself, sir!"

Sunny walked closer, summoned his chair, and sat down near the bed. Then, he tried to say something, only to find out that no words came to his mind.

Eventually, he awkwardly asked:

"How are you doing?"

Luster stared at him for a bit, then suddenly grinned and wiggled his stumps.

"Don't worry about me, sir. I'm doing fine… really. I did tell you how my whole right arm was bitten off once, right? This is only a tiny bit worse… hell, if I lose my left arm as well, one day, I'll be able to brag about losing all my limbs to protect humanity. Girls can't resist a hero, you know!"

Sunny blinked.

'I guess he really is alright.'

He sighed.

"Well… don't worry too much. There are not a lot of great healers here in Falcon Scott, and all of them are terribly busy. Once you get to Eastern Antarctica, and from there back to NQSC, though, the government will pull out all the stops. You'll be as good as new in no

time."

Despite his intention to comfort the young man, Luster's smile suddenly dimmed. Looking away, he remained silent for a few seconds, then said quietly:

"Ah, yes. Certainly, sir. Once I'm back in NQSC…"

Sunny frowned a little.

"Throw these stupid thoughts out of your head. You did more than enough. Very few people deserve to go home more than you… so, enjoy the cruise, and then make sure to get better and relax during an extended vacation. That's an order."

He paused, then added seriously:

"Plus, the Rhino blew up. What the hell do I need you for, now? Keeping you would probably just be a waste of perfectly fine provisions…"

Hearing that, Luster laughed.

"Ah, I see. When you put it that way…"

He sighed.

"It's not that I think that I don't deserve an early dispensation, sir. It's just that..."

The young man briefly glanced at Kim, then grew silent.

He did not want to leave his comrades behind. Sunny could understand that… but there was no other way. Restoring two legs to a person was not impossible, if sufficiently powerful healers were involved, but it took time, and a long period of recovery would still follow. By the time Luster was in good enough shape to fight again, the Antarctica Campaign would be over.

He shook his head.

"The way I see it, your lucky charm finally worked. If it wasn't for

you, Kim would be dead… Dorn too, probably, and maybe even Belle and Samara. You did well, Luster. You served through the hardest part of the whole campaign… things will calm down after the Second Army arrives. So, cheer up."

Luster looked at him, then slowly nodded.

"That thing… you killed it, right, sir? What Rank and Class it was?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Yes… I killed it alright. It was a Corrupted Devil, and a very scary one at that."

The young man leaned tiredly on the backrest of the hospital bed, and smiled.

"A Corrupted Devil… good, that's good. There's no shame, then… ha, I survived an attack of a Corrupted Devil? Wow… I'm pretty awesome, don't you think, Kim?"

She scooped another spoonful of porridge, brought it to his mouth, and sighed.

"Yeah… yeah, you are pretty awesome… now eat the damn sludge before I get angry…"

Sunny watched them silently for a couple more minutes, then found an excuse and left.

He found Belle a few rooms over, where dozens of sleeping pods were installed in a large hall. The swordsman was standing near a particular one, staring somberly at its closed lid. Inside, Quentin's body slept peacefully, not quite dead, but also not quite alive.

The healer had neither died nor turned Hollow yet. Considering the circumstances, that probably meant that he had fought his way to a Seed and entered a Nightmare.

Conquering a Second Nightmare alone… his chances were exceedingly low, but not entirely non-existent.

Sunny stopped near Belle and looked at the sleeping pod, too.

After a while, the swordsman suddenly said, his voice uncharacteristically sober:

"Major… do you remember how I joked that Luster would be the first one to die?"

Sunny spared him a surprised glance.

"...Sure. I do."

Belle remained silent for a long time, then awkwardly scratched the back of his head.

"I was thinking… technically… I can still win that bet, right?"

With that, the swordsman glanced at him and grinned.

Sunny scowled.

"I guess… but who allowed you guys to bet without my permission? Unacceptable! I want in on the bet…"

Chapter-1049: The Fall of Falcon Scott (67)

After leaving the hospital and sending his soldiers to the barracks, Sunny remained on the street, watching the snow dance in the stark beams of electric light. He had to rest, too…

After a while, Sunny sighed awkwardly.

'Right. I'm homeless now.'

He had been staying in the Rhino, but now, the APC was gone. That fact actually made Sunny feel very sad. The trusty vehicle had accompanied the Irregulars to the edge of the Antarctic Center and back, surviving countless battles. He had grown attached to it, so losing the vehicle was a bit of a blow.

It felt… like the end of something.

Shaking his head, Sunny started walking. He could get himself a room in the barracks, of course — the First Army had suffered severe losses, so there was plenty of space. But it was exactly for that reason that he didn't want to. Being surrounded by bereaved soldiers would do his already foul mood no good.

'I can't stand the thought of having them look at me right now.'

Respect, admiration, hope… that was what he saw in the eyes of the soldiers when they looked at him. They all had an expectation of him, and carrying those expectations was tiresome.

'To hell with it…'

Sunny simply wandered aimlessly for a while, trying not to think about anything in particular. In the end, he found himself standing in

front of a familiar dormitory tower. He hesitated for a bit, then entered and descended to one of the underground levels.

The dormitory seemed much emptier than before. There had been three families living in the same apartment as Professor Obel and Beth, but now, he could only sense two shadows inside. Sunny stared at the flimsy door for a few moments, then knocked on it.

A few seconds later, it opened, revealing Professor Obel. The old man looked like he always did, having not changed even a little.

Why would he? The previous day was a dreadfully eventful one for Sunny, but for the Professor, it was just like all the others.

The old man looked at him with concern.

"Major Sunless? Oh, my! What happened?"

Even though most of Sunny's body was hidden by the black silk of the Graceless Dusk, he still looked rather rough. There were ugly bruises covering his usually pristine skin, and his eyes were tired and dim.

He forced out a smile.

"Oh… that. Don't worry, I'm fine. It was just a very tough battle."

Everyone in Falcon Scott knew that the previous assault was a terrible one. After all, a large part of the defensive wall, as well as a vast stretch of the city itself, were now replaced by a giant crater. Even people hidden underground felt the titanic explosion. There were rumors, too — Army Command itself publicized the death of Goliath, hoping to improve morale among the refugees.

Professor Obel nodded.

"Yes… we heard all about it. Thank the gods you survived!"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then said:

"I, uh… you mentioned setting aside some food for me, the last time we met? To tell you the truth… I am kind of starving…"

The old man laughed.

"Sure, sure! Come in. Beth, Major Sunless is here!"

The young woman emerged from one of the rooms and looked at him with a hint of relief. She froze for a moment, then turned away and cleared her throat.

"Oh… it's you. Good. I… I'll go heat up the leftovers."

They settled in the kitchen, and soon, Sunny was presented with several plates of simple, but delicious food. Professor Obel had not been joking when he said that he would cook up a feast — the ingredients Beth had procured were indeed rare for the besieged city, and made for a splendid dish. It was definitely better than what would have been available to Sunny in the barracks.

Sunny ate and chatted idly with the two of them. As he did, some of the tension pressing down on his heart strangely dissipated… but most of it still remained.

At some point, Professor Obel suddenly smiled.

"Ah, it totally slipped my mind! We were placed in the queue, finally. Both Beth and I will be leaving the day after tomorrow. We've already received the tickets… I imagine you will follow soon, too, Major?"

Sunny smiled as well.

'Finally, some good news.'

He nodded and took a sip of fragrant tea.

"I imagine we will be the last ones to ship out, a couple of days after you. Three weeks are coming to an end, after all… even though there were some delays, the Army mostly managed to stick to the schedule. Somehow. So, the next time we see each other will probably be in East Antarctica, unless they send you to the Northern Quadrant right away."

He glanced at Beth, hesitated for a moment, then said awkwardly:

"Oh, by the way… my APC blew up, so... I kind of have nowhere to stay. Is it alright if I crash here today?"

Professor Obel chuckled.

"Of course! Most of the people in the dormitory have already been evacuated. There are three empty bedrooms in our apartment alone — you can take any one you want."

Beth hid a smile and nodded.

"Sure... you can stay, if you want."

Sunny smiled back and took another sip of tea. After that, he remained silent for a while, distracted.

Noticing his strange mood, the old man asked:

"Is something weighing on your mind, young man?"

Sunny flinched a little, then shrugged.

"No, nothing in particular. Just the usual stuff. I just… feel listless, I guess."

He lingered for a few moments, then suddenly asked:

"Have I ever told you why I came to Antarctica, Professor?"

The old man and Beth glanced at each other, then shook their heads. A wistful expression appeared on Sunny's face.

"It's stupid, really. Someone told me that I was lacking. So, I thought that maybe I would be able to find whatever it is that I lack here, in the Southern Quadrant."

He grew quiet, prompting the old man to ask with a hint of curiosity:

"So, did you end up finding what you were looking for?"

Sunny hesitated, then laughed.

"I am honestly not sure. It is hard to find something that you don't

know how to recognize. Maybe I found something, maybe I didn't. Actually, maybe I even lost something instead. I guess time will tell."

He finished his tea and looked at the two of them with a smile:

"I did find some other precious things, though. I mean… this dish? It's a real treasure. You ought to teach me the recipe! I always dreamed of owning a shop, you know, but after meeting you, Professor, I am starting to think that opening a restaurant might be a better idea…"

Chapter-1050: The Fall of Falcon Scott (68)

After an eventful night, Sunny left the dormitory in a much improved mood. The air outside was frigid with bone-chilling cold, but it actually felt pleasant against his bruises. Sunny headed in the direction of the barracks, whistling a simple tune under his nose. As he walked, one of his shadows flew toward the distant ramparts to check if everything was alright there.

Apart from the fact that soldiers were miserable because of the heinous cold, even more so than usual, the situation seemed to be under control. Disparate groups of Nightmare Creatures were throwing themselves against the ramparts, some larger than the others, but it was nothing that the army could not handle.

'Everything seems fine, for now…'

Sunny was still hurting all over, but at least he was capable of walking without a limp now. The barracks were a considerable distance away, but there was no rush. He enjoyed this rare moment of peace a great deal, studying the city as he traversed it.

Falcon Scott… was much emptier now. Miraculously, the First Army had actually managed to evacuate most of the two hundred million refugees. Now, less than two tenths of that number remained, not nearly enough to make the city feel crowded. Even though countless people fought and sacrificed to make it happen, Sunny couldn't help but feel that this emptiness was the direct result of his actions.

It was nice to see his labor bear fruit.

Among the ancient heroes Nephis sometimes liked to talk about, there was one named Heracles, who had apparently accomplished twelve labors. Sunny wondered what that guy would think about

defending this damn city.

Well, from the descriptions, Heracles seemed like no more than an Awakened with a moderately powerful physical Aspect… maybe a rather average Ascended. He would probably think that Falcon Scott was a hellish nightmare, and die in the first few days of the siege.

'Huh…'

As Sunny walked, a swift shadow fell from the sky, and a black crow suddenly landed on his shoulder. The crow stared at him for a moment, and then cawed:

"Sah-nee! Sah-nee!"

Sunny spared him a somber glance.

"What?"

The Echo waved its wings.

"Come! Come!"

Then, it jumped off his shoulder and disappeared in the direction of the government complex.

Sunny frowned, then quietly cursed and dove into the shadows.

It seemed that his good mood was not meant to last.

He glided forward with incredible speed, reaching the complex in no time at all. Emerging from the darkness near the guarded gates, he waited a few seconds for the security officers to confirm his identity — a useless formality, considering that pretty much everyone knew what he looked like by now — and entered the building.

Quickly finding his way underground, Sunny hurried to the conference room where the Irregulars usually gathered. As he was approaching, however, there was suddenly a loud bang, and the walls shook a little, dust falling from the ceiling.

'What the…'

Uneasy, he entered the room and saw Master Jet standing with her back to him. The wall in front of her was deformed, a net of cracks running through the armored alloy from the point where her fist had collided with it.

Soul Reaper remained motionless for a moment, then turned to him. Her usually calm face was contorted by an expression of dark, boiling anger.

As soon as Sunny saw it, his heart skipped a beat. He had never seen Master Jet lose control of herself in that way…

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes for a moment, then said:

"Sunny. You are here… good."

He glanced at the destroyed wall, then at her. Feeling a chill run down his spine, Sunny steeled himself and asked:

"What happened?"

Jet let out a long sigh. When she spoke, her voice was cold and glum:

"...It's Tyris. She finally lost a fight."

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The two of them headed to the headquarters of the White Feather clan without wasting any time. While the elevator was taking them to the ground level of the government complex, Sunny tried to keep his voice even as he asked:

"What do you mean, lost a fight? Is she alive?"

Jet gritted her teeth.

"I don't know. I've been notified that something went wrong just half an hour ago. Roan sent me a message personally right before you came… but he didn't go into detail."

Sunny's face fell. If Jet's only source of information was Master Roan, that meant that Army Command had chosen to keep it a secret for

now. And if Army Command was keeping secrets from someone like Soul Reaper… things couldn't be good.

As they emerged from the underground complex and hurried to the White Feather compound, Sunny shivered again and noticed that it had gotten even colder outside. Before, he had not paid the cold any attention, but now, the fall in temperature seemed foreboding.

'Curse it, curse it, curse it all…'

The guards of the compound seemed to have received instructions, and almost immediately after Sunny and Jet arrived, a familiar young woman appeared to guide them inside. He briefly felt glad to see that she had survived the battle with Devouring Cloud, but then his thoughts turned grim and tumultuous once again.

Sunny was… shaken.

He couldn't help but think about Saint Tyris, silently wishing for her to be alive. At the same time, he had to think about what her fall would mean for the evacuation… with no one to stop the Winter Beast, what would happen to the city?

The two worries competed against each other, pressing down on his heart with terrible weight.

Finally, they reached an isolated room in the depths of the compound. The young Awakened spared the door an anguished look, then stepped aside, gesturing for them to come in.

Inside, they saw an empty hall with some medical equipment and a lonely operating table standing in its center. The table, and the floor around it, were marred with blood. On it… Saint Tyris was laying, her eyes closed.

Sunny let out a relieved sign when he saw that her chest was slowly rising and falling. Sky Tide was still breathing… she was still alive…

However, she looked like a corpse.

Her whole body was covered in blood and blemished by severe frostbite. Tyris was unconscious, breathing shallowly. Her face was

terribly pale, and her lips looked blue. And that… that was, without a doubt, only after the healers of the White Feather clan had tended to her. Sunny could not imagine how the fearsome Saint had looked before.

Roan was standing above her, not looking much better. He had been severely injured while luring the Devouring Cloud toward the city — even now, the charismatic Master was yet to recover from his wounds. One of his arms hung limply in a sling, and his usually lively face was dark and lifeless.

When Sunny and Jet entered, Roan slowly looked away from his wife and gave them a dull glance.

Soul Reaper gritted her teeth.

"Roan. What the hell happened?!"

He stared at them for a few moments, then turned back to Saint Tyris.

"Isn't it obvious? She lost. Actually, it's a miracle that she was able to hold back that monster for so long. It's also a miracle that she survived."

He remained silent for a while, then added evenly:

"You are asking the wrong question, though."

Master Jet's icy blue eyes widened slightly. She hesitated, then asked coldly:

"...What the hell is going to happen, then?"

Roan lowered his head. Then, he straightened his back, and looked at them once more.

"I think you know."

His eyes were bleak, and tired.

"The Winter Beast is coming, and there's no one to stop it. It's over.

Maybe tomorrow, or the day after that, anyone who still remains in this city will die. I'm sorry, Soul Reaper... there's nothing else we can do."

Chapter-1051: The Fall of Falcon Scott (69)

After battling the harrowing Corrupted Titan for three long months, Saint Tyris of the White Feather clan had finally been defeated. Even though she had miraculously managed to survive, with Sky Tide incapacitated, there was no one left to stop the Winter Beast from advancing on the city.

The titan was already moving closer to the largest — and only — siege capital left standing in the region. The temperature was falling, and the winds were picking up, heralding the descent of a terrible blizzard.

Inevitably, a series of disastrous events was bound to happen.

The first of these events, and the catalyst that sparked the chain reaction… was the withdrawal of the White Feather clan from the Antarctic Center. They had been sent here to support the First Evacuation Army on behalf of the great clan Valor, but were not part of it. Naturally, their first priority was to preserve their Saint's life.

Even if the Awakened of White Feather had decided to stay, for whatever reason, Army Command would have insisted that they retreat in haste. The life of an allied Transcendent was too precious of a resource for the government, too.

…As the clan's compound turned into a hub of frenetic activity, with everyone hastily preparing for departure, Sunny and Jet were left to their own devices. After their conversation with Roan ended, they found themselves all but ignored by the hurrying members of the clan — no one even remembered to shoo the two Ascended away.

They were not in a hurry to leave, either, mostly because neither of them really knew what to do. The situation had changed too fast, and

too dreadfully… Sunny felt lost and resigned, and although Jet was trying to hide it, he could see that she was shaken, as well.

The two of them found a place out of the way and just stood there for a while, silent.

Eventually, Sunny said:

"...Roan is wrong. It's not all over. Even without Tyris, we still have a Transcendent. You, me, Bloodwave… we should be able to give the Winter Beast a fight. We already killed one titan, so why can't we kill another?"

Jet somberly shook her head.

"There's an abyssal gap between a Fallen Titan and a Corrupted one, in terms of power. Tyris was not able to fight the Winter Beast because she was a Transcendent — she was able to fight it because she was a Transcendent whose Aspect countered the creature's powers, and an astonishingly steadfast one, at that. Even then… you don't really understand it, do you?"

Sunny frowned.

"I guess not. What is it exactly that I don't understand?"

Soul Reaper let out a grave sigh.

"Sunny… there's currently around thirty million people left in Falcon Scott, as well as twenty thousand soldiers. There are also a thousand or so Awakened veterans. However, all of them combined wouldn't be able to do anything against a Corrupted Titan. Even if there were ten times more, the result would be the same. Yet, Tyris alone held the creature back for three months. What does that mean?"

He stared at her silently for a while, then turned away with a dark expression on his face.

"...It means that one Saint is worth more than thirty million people, twenty thousand soldiers, and one thousand Awakened."

A corner of Jet's mouth twisted slightly.

"Smart."

Sunny shook his head:

"What are you getting at, though?"

The hint of a smile disappeared from Soul Reaper's face. She lingered for a few moments, then said:

"I am trying to tell you that there are no you, me, and Bloodwave. Bloodwave is going to leave with the White Feather clan… do you think they are going to let Tyris travel across the strait unprotected? She is unconscious and vulnerable. What happens if something attacks the ship? Neither Army Command nor Valor would allow that to happen.

So, the House of Night will do their best to protect the most valuable asset… which means that Bloodwave won't be here when the Winter Beast arrives."

Sunny gritted his teeth, trying to suppress the blinding fury that threatened to consume his mind.

"...This is such crap!"

Jet's face twitched, but she calmly shook her head.

"No. It's simply resource management."

Sunny stared at her with bewilderment for a few moments, then suddenly laughed.

"So, what? This is it? It really is all over? What about the rest of the poor fools who are still stuck in this city?!"

Soul Reaper remained silent for a while. Then, she said evenly:

"Well, there are thirty million people left here. With the current speed of evacuation… If the Winter Beast comes tomorrow, twenty million will die. If it comes the day after tomorrow, ten million will die. Theoretically. Of course, in reality, things are not going to go that smoothly."

Sunny gave her a dark look.

"...How so?"

Jet sighed.

"Something like that… it won't remain a secret for long. As soon as the rumors spread, this whole city will go crazy. Evacuation queue? Forget about it. People will be storming the port and jumping off the cliffs. It's going to be pandemonium."

Sunny opened his mouth, startled by her callousness. However, it only lasted a moment. He was just as jaded, after all… if he had used his brain for a moment instead of allowing himself to be rattled, he would have come to the same conclusions.

He cursed.

"So what are we supposed to do? The two of us, I mean. I… I refuse to believe that there's no way to slow down the Winter Beast. Come on! We just need to hold it off for a couple of days."

Soul Reaper gave him a long look.

After a while, she said:

"Sunny… you might survive the descent of the Winter Beast. Maybe — maybe — I can survive it, too. My cohort is gone, though, while yours is not. And your soldiers… they will definitely die. Ascended like us have no business facing a Corrupted Titan, as for Awakened? They don't stand a chance.

So, if I were you, I would make sure that they get on a ship as fast as possible. Everything else comes later."

He smiled bitterly.

"That's it? You're a damn colonel. Can't you do something?"

Jet simply shook her head.

"Once the news breaks, my rank won't have any meaning anymore.

Who cares about hierarchy in the face of annihilation? Sunny… this is going to be an every man for himself situation very soon. We… we are all going to have to make some choices. The best we can do is make sure that we don't regret them later. So… keep that in mind, and do your best.

That's all the advice I can give."

She sighed, then briefly glanced at the star insignia on her shoulder and walked away.

Before she left, however, Sunny shouted:

"Oh, yeah?! So are you going to get on a ship yourself?!"

Soul Reaper paused. She remained silent for a few moments, then said without turning back:

"...I sort of hate ships, to be honest. It is really a pity."

And then, she left.

Sunny found himself alone, staring at the empty space where Master Jet had been a few seconds ago. Shaking his head, he scoffed and turned away.

'What a coincidence. I sort of hate ships, too.'

Chapter-1052: The Fall of Falcon Scott (70)

The first thing Sunny did was go find Belle, Dorn, and Samara. However, none of them had returned from the Dream Realm yet — all three were peacefully asleep in their pods, not knowing that back in the waking world, Falcon Scott was now on the verge of destruction. For now, all he could do was wait.

Not wishing to waste time, Sunny tried to go through the official channels to make sure that his cohort was not going to be left out of the evacuation plans. At that point, however, things had already started going out of control. Just as Master Jet had predicted.

The government complex was in a state of frenzy. The information regarding the withdrawal of the White Feather clan and the impending doom approaching the city was supposed to be kept strictly secret… but with people responsible for withholding it realizing that they themselves would most likely be left behind, there was no way for the truth to remain hidden.

The news spread through the city like wildfire. With it came panic.

Sunny spent some time fruitlessly trying to get the logistics officers, or anyone at all, to issue an order for his cohort to evacuate, but no one knew what to do, or even if they had authority to do anything. Worse still, as soon as Saint Tyris had been defeated, the influence the Winter Beast was exerting on the region seemed to have doubled in strength.

Now, even the robust communication array of the siege capital was having trouble connecting the local branch of Army Command to central headquarters. Even if there was a leader who could bring order to this complicated situation, they were simply too far away.

In the end, all he could get from the administrative personnel was a vague promise of a "priority placement" while boarding the leaving ships. They did not seem to know quite what it meant themselves, but the underlying message was clear — if he could get a spot on one of the evacuation vessels, no one was going to stop him. In fact, this was true for all the surviving soldiers of the First Army.

If they wanted to leave, they could. Who was going to stop them? After all, the soldiers were armed, while the refugees were not. In the ruthless mathematics of war, their lives were also more valuable.

In short, the situation had deteriorated to the point of turning into complete lawlessness. The government officers were simply unable to control it anymore.

'Every man for himself.'

Sunny was slightly stunned by how quickly the city had descended into chaos. All it took was a few hours.

There were some exceptions, of course. For example, someone high up in the chain of command managed to enforce the evacuation of the wounded from the army hospital. However, no one knew how effective exactly the execution of that order would be, or how quickly the evacuation would happen.

Sunny was reluctant to leave Luster's fate to chance, though.

He returned to the barracks, which had turned hectic and feverish in his absence. Finally, his soldiers woke up, emerging from their sleeping pods with confused expressions on their faces. Not only was the building full of noise, but their leader was also waiting for them with a grim expression on his face.

Sparing the three Awakened a single glance, Sunny said:

"Let's go get Luster and Kimmy. I'll explain what is happening on the way."

They made their way to the hospital. Outside, the cold was slowly turning unbearable, but despite that, crowds of frightened people were flowing through the streets, some aimless and lost, some full of

frantic determination.

The situation inside the hospital was even worse. Unlike the rest of the people in the city, the medical officers had received direct orders to transfer all the patients to the port fortress, and await immediate evacuation. However, the orders were vague and hastily compiled, lacking a lot of important details and instructions.

Aside from that, moving severely injured soldiers was not as easy as transporting healthy people. Some required special care, some could not be moved at all, unless an Awakened healer got personally involved.

Rattled, Sunny finally understood what the word pandemonium meant.

Cutting through the chaos, he and his soldiers reached Luster's room. After a short conversation with a panicked nurse, they received verbal permission to take him away, and barged inside.

Neither Luster nor Kimmy seemed surprised to see them. In fact, Kim had already prepared the wounded Awakened for departure — he was dressed, freshly bandaged, and holding a pack full of necessary medical supplies and healing agents.

The young man had also received a very generous dose of painkillers.

Seeing Sunny, he smiled stupidly.

"Cap… Major! Huh… uh… where are we going?"

Sunny looked at Kim and gave her a nod.

"Eastern Antarctica. We just need to find you a boat."

The young woman silently took the medicine pack from Luster, hung it across her chest, then forced him to climb on her back. Considering that she was much smaller than the young man, the two of them looked rather comical — but of course, as an Awakened, Kim was more than strong enough to carry a person.

Before they left, Samara suddenly spoke, her usually calm face

turning slightly pale:

"Captain! What about Quentin? We can't… just leave him here…"

Sunny looked at her for a moment, then somberly shook his head.

"We have to. It doesn't matter, anyway… he is in the Nightmare by now. If he survives, the Spell will create an Ascended body for him. If not… taking him with us won't make any difference."

The five of them grew solemn, then reluctantly followed him out. Luster was mumbling something under his nose, but the rest were deathly silent.

On the street, Sunny looked around, then approached a random military vehicle and used his bare hand to tear through the armored alloy, destroying the locking mechanism of its door. With how many soldiers had perished during the siege, there was a surplus of machinery in the city — no one was going to miss one PTV. It was just that he had no time to request proper access.

Luckily, army transports did not have a complicated start-up sequence. All he had to do was override the controls with his military ID, then access the internal computer and assign the vehicle to the First Irregular Company. After that, the PTV recognized Sunny as its valid driver.

'Damn… I never even got close to stealing a PTV when I lived in the outskirts, and now I'm swiping one as an Ascended. What kind of logic is that?'

Darkly amused, he sent the vehicle barreling forward and maneuvered it through the crowded streets at high speed.

"Hold on tight… we need to make a stop first before going to the port."

Soon, he reached the dormitory tower where Professor Obel and Beth were living. Sunny stopped the vehicle and dissipated into the shadows without wasting any time.

A few seconds later, he was standing in front of a familiar door.

Sunny knocked on it several times, praying that they were both home.

Luckily, they were.

Walking inside, Sunny quickly looked around the apartment, then turned to Professor Obel and Beth. From their expressions, he understood that they already knew what was happening.

Beth's eyes were wide and shaken.

"Sunny! Is… is it true?"

He nodded, then said steadily:

"Get your things. We need to leave as soon as possible."

The young woman seemed startled.

"Leave? Leave to where?"

Sunny spared her a quick glance.

"To the port, of course. You need to get on a ship."

She took a small step back.

"But… but our tickets are not due until…"

Taking a step forward, Sunny took her by the shoulders and looked her in the eyes.

"Forget about the tickets. You are leaving today. Now, go! There's no time to waste."

Neither Beth nor Professor Obel had a lot of things to gather, so they were out of the apartment in less than fifteen minutes. The old man remained quiet throughout all that time, only speaking when spoken to. His eyes were calm, but burdened.

Diving from the chilling cold into the warm interior of the PTV, Sunny checked to see if everyone had settled and drove off.

Two beams of light cut through the darkness as the vehicle sped through the snow-covered streets.

Once again, they were heading north… this time, toward the port fortress of the doomed siege capital.

Chapter-1053: The Fall of Falcon Scott (71)

Getting close to the port turned out to be complicated. There were too many people and too many vehicles heading the same way — at some point, driving forward became simply impossible. The road was utterly jammed, which was a truly strange scene. Back in NQSC, PTVs were somewhat of a rare sight, but Falcon Scott was brimming with military transports of all kinds.

Understanding that their vehicle was truly stuck, Sunny grimaced and told everyone to get out. As they did, a litany of sounds assaulted their ears — the rumbling hum of engines, the ear-piercing wail of electric horns, the anxious shouts of countless people… all of it fused into a cacophonous cloud of noise.

Around them, a vast crowd of people was flowing through the congested road, the vehicles waiting hopelessly for a chance to move forward. There were men, women, and children — some carrying bags and backpacks containing their belongings, some empty-handed.

A driver of a massive transport was standing on the side of the cabin, screaming furiously for everyone to get out of his way and that he had orders to reach the port. His yells were useless, of course. Even if the crowd of people parted, there was another vehicle right in front of the transport, and another one after that, and another one after that — all similarly stuck.

The people moving toward the port on foot were acting senselessly, as well. It was not like they had a chance of getting on a ship simply by reaching the fortress — most of them had simply panicked and lost all reason. Some had not even wanted to go, but were swept up by the crowd.

In any case, the mob presented a serious obstacle to Sunny. Luckily,

his uniform had turned out to be good enough of a deterrent — where he walked, a small bubble of empty space magically appeared, allowing his group to advance forward with sufficient speed. Even in this state, the people were able to recognize a Master.

Some moved aside out of respect and reverence, some out of fear.

'This is… damn…'

Sunny had considered himself an experienced person, and not without reason. From the starless void of the Forgotten Shore to the frozen hellscape of Antarctica, he had seen and lived through a lot of things, both incredible and terrifying. However, he had never experienced anything on the scale of what was currently happening in Falcon Scott.

Even the destruction of the Ivory City did not quite come close.

By the time the cohort reached the northern section of the wall, he was in a grim and sober mood. Here, there was another massive gate, its wings currently retracted into the framework of the barrier. Beyond it was a vast span of concrete that led directly to the edge of the tall cliffs.

Usually, there would be several organized lines of refugees waiting for their turn to use the elevators, and a lot of loader robots carrying cargo to and from the fortress. Now, however, the whole space was covered by a sea of people, all frantic to get closer to the edge and get a chance to descend to the coast.

Someone was still operating the elevators, but the personnel of the transfer station had clearly given up on trying to control the mob. People were pressed tightly against the alloy barriers that were meant to prevent them from falling down, and some were even trying to climb over them. Nothing but a deadly fall awaited them on the other side, but the climbers seemed completely crazed.

Sunny stared at the startling scene for a few moments, then looked away. He felt a chill that had nothing to do with the unbearable cold of the polar winter run down his spine.

A human mob… was a frightening thing. It was even more frightening because everything had been fine just half a day ago. In such a short time, the whole city seemed to have gone mad…

'What are these fools hoping to accomplish?'

Sunny flinched.

What was he hoping to accomplish?

Gritting his teeth, he pushed forward through the crowd. His uniform and aura of authority cleared a path, and when that was not enough, he simply pushed people away — with Sunny's strength, it was not at all hard. Remaining gentle enough not to crush anyone was much harder.

His soldiers followed. After experiencing the horrors of the Nightmare Spell and the tempering of countless battles, they all managed to remain composed. Beth and Professor Obel, however, looked deeply rattled. Still, they followed, too.

After some time, Sunny finally reached the entrance to one of the elevators. Currently, it was closed, since the platform had not yet arrived. The refugees moved slightly aside to give the Awakened some breathing room. However, he could still hear their voices.

"Look! A Master!"

"You there, officer! What the hell is happening?!"

"Please, take me with you!"

"Curse you!"

He kept looking forward, ignoring the yells. Some people tried to ingratiate themselves with Sunny, some cursed him out and demanded explanations. Some stupidly became overjoyed, as if the appearance of an Ascended was going to solve everything.

'At least it's not as cold.'

With so many bodies around, the oppressive cold had retreated a

little.

Eventually, a massive platform arrived from the bottom of the cliffs, and the barrier retracted into the ground. Sunny led his group forward, taking a place near the opposite side of it.

From there, he could see the ocean, and the port fortress below. There was only one gargantuan ship currently anchored near it, with several large ferries coursing between the vessel and the pier to bring people aboard. The port itself was as crowded as the transfer station, and so was the pier. The situation inside seemed even more chaotic than here.

After around two thousand people and several large transport vehicles entered the platform, the barrier rose once again, and the elevator plummeted down. It seemed to be moving at a greater speed than usual, causing several passengers to yelp in fear. However, the platform safely reached the bottom of the cliffs in less than a minute.

There was a walled road leading from the elevators to the port. Half of it was designated for pedestrian traffic, half for the vehicles — that road was congested as well, but further away. Sunny noticed soldiers standing watch above it, carrying out their duty with lost expressions on their faces. Luckily, no Nightmare Creatures had chosen today to attack the city from the coast.

"Let's go."

Glancing at Kim, who was still carrying Luster, he continued toward the port.

It took some time to reach it, as well.

The closer they got to the pier, the more frantic the atmosphere became. Some of the people here arrived after the terrible news of Sky Tide's defeat had spread, but some had been here even earlier, happily waiting to be brought away to Eastern Antarctica as per the government queue. Now, their chances of getting a spot on the ship were suddenly uncertain.

"B—but… we were scheduled to be relocated today! Look! We have

tickets!"

"Get the hell out of my way!"

"Sir! Please, just let me through!"

"When is the next ship arriving?! When is…"

The port officers were desperately trying to create some semblance of order, but it was useless. Still, only so many people could get aboard, so there were soldiers standing guard at the entrance to the pier, and a barrier of alloy mesh that slid up and down, letting groups of refugees proceed further from time to time.

Every time the barrier retracted, the crowd grew agitated and tried to push forward, only to be thrown back by the heavy gazes of the guards.

Sunny hesitated.

'What now…'

Chapter-1054: The Fall of Falcon Scott (72)

He looked around, studying the barrier and the crowded pier that could be seen through the mesh. Then, suddenly, Sunny heard a familiar voice:

"Move back, damn it! Don't push! If you have a spot in the queue, present an ID! If you are a member of the First Army, come that way! Get a hold of yourself and behave like people!"

He looked around and saw a tall, handsome man with indigo eyes and hair that seemed somewhere between black and blue standing in front of the barrier, struggling to hold back the panicked crowd.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

Pushing closer to the man, he called out:

"Naeve? What the hell are you doing here?"

The man — it was indeed Master Naeve of the House of Night — blinked a couple of times, then looked in his direction with a confused expression.

"...Sunny? Gods, it's you! What are... ah, doesn't matter. I'm now in charge of boarding, I guess."

Sunny led his group to the barrier, stopping right in front of the Nightwalker. Naeve gestured for a nearby Awakened to assume his position and took a step to the side.

He gave Sunny a somber look.

"That ship over there is where I'm assigned to. We are going to leave

once we're at capacity… actually, we are already over capacity. But a few more people can still be squeezed in, so..."

Sunny frowned.

"What about Bloodwave?"

The Nightwalker sighed.

"He led the other ship away a few hours ago, with Saint Tyris aboard. There will be more ships tomorrow, and more the day after that… if the Winter Beast does not arrive sooner. But Uncle won't be coming back. He'll guard the strait until the… until the relocation is over. And then, we will resume evacuating people over the ocean, to the Northern Quadrant."

Sunny nodded.

'Figures.'

"Listen…"

Naeve spoke first, interrupting him:

"Do you need to get on the ship?"

Sunny grew quiet, suddenly ashamed for no reason. Strangely, he felt thankful to the Nightwalker for not forcing him to say it aloud.

After a few moments of awkward silence, Sunny shook his head.

"Not me. I just need to place a tether inside."

Ascended could simply retreat into the Dream Realm whenever they wished. Even if their tether remained in the Antarctic Center, a Saint would then be able to bring them back to the waking world, to a safer region. Granted, there were no Saints on the Ivory Island, so Sunny was a bit more inconvenienced in that regard.

Of course, leaving the waking world was not an instantaneous process. It required some time and absolute concentration, so doing it in the middle of a battle was usually impossible. Any Ascended that

remained in the city would have to travel to the Dream Realm before the Winter Beast arrived, or risk annihilation with the rest of the mundane people.

Still, taking up a spot on a ship would be a waste.

…And Sunny had long decided to stay and try to stall the titan, anyway.

He looked at Naeve.

"I don't need one. But my people…"

Sunny glanced at Beth, Professor Obel, and the members of his cohort. Naeve looked at them, too.

His face fell.

The Nightwalker hesitated for a few moments, then said quietly:

"Sunny… I have three spots reserved, as a member of the crew. I will give you those. Beyond that, however… I can get the rest of your cohort onboard, too. Members of the First Army have a priority right to be evacuated. But those additional spots, they will come at the expense of civilians with officially issued tickets. So… it's your decision."

He paused, and then added apologetically:

"Sorry, but you have to make it quick. This is going to be the last batch we let in tonight."

As though to echo his words, the mesh barrier suddenly slid into the ground with a metallic screech. The soldiers started checking the IDs and letting people pass through one by one.

Sunny froze for a moment. His face grew still.

'So…'

His heart grew heavy.

'So this is what it came to.'

Three spots... or having to displace civilians who had a spot in the queue.

His soldiers had all heard what Naeve said. Sunny turned around, looking at them. Kim, Luster, Dorn, Samara, Belle… Beth, Professor Obel…

What was he supposed to do?

'Curse it all…'

As Sunny studied the faces of his soldiers, Belle, Dorn, and Samara briefly glanced at each other.

Then, the giant man looked at Sunny and slightly shook his head.

There were no words spoken. And yet, for a moment, Sunny felt as though his heart was pierced by a sharp blade.

He lowered his head, then looked at Professor Obel. The old man met his gaze, and the two of them remained motionless for several seconds, as if having a silent conversation.

Finally, Sunny looked at the mob of frightened refugees crowding behind the line of the barrier, all desperate to be saved.

He sighed.

'How… terrible. Why the hell did I want to be an officer? Gods… no amount of the damned contribution points was worth it.'

Then, Sunny straightened his back and said confidently:

"Beth, Professor Obel. You go in first."

Beth gave him a startled glance, but the old man gently pushed her forward. They moved past Naeve, the young woman crossing the line first.

However, as soon as she did, Professor Obel silently took a step back.

At the same time, Sunny pushed Kim and Luster. His push, though, was not too gentle. The two stumbled past Naeve, ending up on the other side of the line, too.

They were one of the last people to be let through. A moment later, the barrier rose with a screech, and a wall of alloy mesh cut off the pier from the rest of the port.

Sunny, Professor Obel, Samara, Dorn, and Belle remained on one side.

Kim, Luster, and Beth were on the other.

The young woman turned around, confused. When she saw the old man behind the fence, her eyes widened.

"Professor! What… why are you…"

Professor Obel smiled.

"It's alright, Beth. We already had that conversation, remember? Stop being stubborn and forgive this old man. Ah, my old bones really can't endure another journey…"

She grabbed the mesh, frantic.

"No, no! You can't! How could you?!"

He sighed.

"I only have a few more years left to live, at best. Beth… I might have accomplished a lot in this life, but it's coming to an end."

The old man chuckled.

"You will accomplish even more, given time. What, do you think I was already brilliant at your age? Gods, no! I barely knew how to tie my shoes. Letting someone young take my place is a privilege of mine… especially someone like you, or Awakened Kim over there."

Beth stared at him for a few long moments, her eyes glistening. Then, she turned to Sunny:

"S—sunny… what, what about…"

He scoffed.

"I'll be fine. It's like you don't know me. There's not a single selfless bone in my body, so you don't really have to worry about my safety."

At that point, Kim finally spoke:

"Captain…"

Sunny glanced at her and frowned.

"You keep Luster and Beth safe. Who knows what will happen? Go board the ship and get the hell out of here, Kim. That's an order."

He remained silent for a moment, and then added:

"Also, it's Major! Damn it."

And that was that.

Soon, Kim, Luster, and Beth boarded a ferry and were taken to the towering vessel.

Sunny and the rest remained in the doomed siege capital. In Falcon Scott.

...The air was getting colder and colder.

Chapter-1055: The Fall of Falcon Scott (73)

After things were settled… Sunny did not really know what to do. Professor Obel wanted to go back to the dormitory, for now, so Sunny asked Belle, Dorn, and Samara to take the old man there. After that, they were supposed to return to the barracks.

Left alone, Sunny remained motionless for a few minutes, then used Shadow Step to sneak aboard Naeve's ship. Placing a tether there did not take him much time. After the invisible mark was created, he used the same method to return to the port fortress.

It was already night… of course, night and day were absolutely the same during the long winter, here in Antarctica. Still, it meant that the Winter Beast would arrive in around twelve hours, at the earliest, and in no more than forty at the latest.

Sunny slowly made his way back to the elevators. No one was moving in the opposite direction of the port, so he did not have to force his way through the crowd. He just walked slowly, moving aside to let vehicles pass from time to time. The elevators were going up entirely empty, as well.

His lonesome figure startled the crowd of people waiting for the platform to arrive at the upper transfer station. Sunny spared them a heavy glance, then sighed and dissipated into the shadow. He had no desire to travel through the mob again.

To waste as little essence as possible, he simply glided through the darkness and appeared some distance away, in the shadow of the city wall. Then, he used a lift to reach the battlements and finally escaped the panicked sea of people.

From here, he could see the vast expanse of the city. Falcon Scott was

bathed in darkness and suffused with stark artificial light. Snowflakes danced in the frigid air, and above it all, the ghostly aurora swirled like a celestial river of ghostly flames. Countless stars shone coldly high above.

Sunny looked at the dreamlike scene for a few moments, then sighed.

'How come it looks so… beautiful?'

On the other side of the wall was the ocean. He could see the port below, the overflowing mass of people within it, and the lone battleship towering above the dark waters. Sunny walked along the length of the wall, keeping his eye on the vessel.

There were soldiers standing watch on the wall. Strangely enough, none of them seemed in a hurry to leave their posts. In fact, he could feel a strange mood permeating the air — the crowd of refugees below was almost frenzied, but here on the battlements, the members of the First Army were almost tranquil.

It was not the resigned tranquility of desperation, either, just… unvarnished calmness of people who had been through hell and did not fear the end.

Soon, he heard one of the soldiers say:

"Look! It's moving."

Sunny could see it, as well. The battleship was finally departing. The titanic chain rattled as it rose, soon revealing a massive anchor. Then, slowly, the giant vessel started to move, distancing itself from the port.

Its departure caused the people packed into the fortress to cry out, the litany of their voices flying on the wind to reach his ears.

A raspy female voice responded to the soldier:

"Poor guys… ah, I feel bad for them. It's too damn cold."

The first, male voice sounded again after a moment of silence.

"Yeah. I hope someone in the port will have enough sense to hand out food, blankets, and something hot to drink. Speaking of something to drink… give that thing here…"

Sunny frowned.

'Wait… don't those voices sound familiar?'

He looked at the pair of talkative soldiers. One of them was a man in the uniform of the First Army, the other was an Awakened woman wearing a beautiful enchanted robe. The two of them were passing a flask of something fragrant between each other while idly observing the departure of the battleship.

Sunny tilted his head, surprised. They were Sergeant Gere and Lieutenant Carin — two officers who had been under his command during the hellish march to Falcon Scott. He had not seen them after reaching the siege capital.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then said:

"Hey, you."

Carin flinched and grabbed the parapet of the battlement with both hands. Her face paled a little.

"Gere… Gere, I think I drank too much! I just heard the Devil calling out to me."

The mundane soldier scoffed.

"Ain't no way you are drunker than me. Aren't you Awakened supposed to be stupidly tough? Though… huh, I thought I heard him too. Weird."

Sunny sighed.

"That's because I'm standing right behind you."

Both of them slowly turned around and stared at him for a few moments. Then, sincere smiles suddenly appeared on their faces.

"Captain!"

"Sir! You're here too?"

He rolled his eyes, then came closer and leaned on the parapet beside them.

"Yes, I'm here too."

After the caravan reached the city, the soldiers and Awakened he had led were absorbed back into the First Army and sent to reinforce the garrison. He had met a few here and there during the siege, but largely, Sunny had no idea what had happened to them.

It was strange to see Gere and Carin again. He studied them for a bit, then asked:

"...The two of you did not board the ship?"

Sergeant Gere hesitated, then shrugged relaxedly.

"Uh… no. It just feels weird, to leave all these people behind and run away. Actually, pretty much no one I know went and took a spot for themselves. Most of us First Army grunts are staying."

He took a sip from the flask and chuckled.

"It's like we all made a weird suicide pact."

Carin pulled the flask out of his hand and smiled.

"It's alright, though. Actually, I feel like I was supposed to die in Erebus Field. That would have been sad."

She took a big gulp and sighed with pleasure.

"Because everyone there died. But here? We already made sure that a hundred and seventy million people escaped. By tomorrow, it's going to be a hundred and eighty. That's… a lot of people! That's a job well done, if you ask me.

And if we manage to hold out for a day or two more… then that's

going to be even better."

Gere nodded.

"That is the reason why we were sent here in the first place, isn't it? To make sure that these people escape. So, saving ourselves at their expense… just feels weird, that's all…"

Sunny studied them for a few moments, remaining silent. Then, he sighed.

"I guess I feel the same way. Plus… I really hate losing, as well."

Carin and Gere looked at him with complicated expressions.

"Sir… you're staying, too?"

Sunny smiled slightly.

"Yeah… ah, but don't get me wrong. I am not planning on dying heroically. Unlike some people, I haven't given up on giving that beast a good fight."

The two soldiers were quiet for a bit. Then, Gere suddenly laughed.

"Good! That's good… hell, now that I know that you're going to be with us too, sir, I am starting to feel that maybe there's still a chance. We already killed one titan, didn't we? What's one more?"

Carin lingered for a moment, then offered the flask to Sunny and patted the mundane soldier on the shoulder.

"Sure, Gere, sure. It's just a Corrupted Titan. Let's kill it. Why not?"

Sunny received the flask and took a sip of something bitter, flavorful, and absolutely searing. He grimaced and coughed, feeling his eyes turn wet with tears.

'Gods… what the hell are they drinking?!'

After a while, when he regained his ability to speak again, Sunny wiped his eyes and passed the flask to Carin.

Feeling a pleasant warmth spread through his body, he said:

"Yeah, you're right. It's just a Corrupted Titan…"

Chapter-1056: The Fall of Falcon Scott (74)

It was already morning by the time Sunny made his way to the dormitory tower where Professor Obel was staying. The cold had gotten even more oppressive, and the wind was like a sharp knife that cut ruthlessly against his skin.

It was rather strange. Soon after the news of the Winter Beast's inevitable attack spread through the city, the whole population seemed to have gone mad. Fear, panic, and desperation were like a wildfire that spread through the siege capital, throwing it into utter chaos. For a while, it was as though Falcon Scott had turned into a wounded, frenzied beast.

…But now, a strange calmness permeated the snow-covered streets. Even near the port, the mob had become meek and docile. A few more ships arrived, and a few more millions of people were taken away. The rest either surrendered themselves to fate, or gave up completely.

As soon as they let go of hope, their fear disappeared. Their panic subsided, too. As Sunny walked through the city, he saw different people coping with the merciless reality of the situation in different ways. Some seemed numb and lethargic. Some seemed serene and at peace. Everyone found solace in their own way.

He even saw groups of people climb to the roofs of the highest buildings, carrying chairs, portable heaters, and food. They were going to watch the arrival of the titan, and meet their ends together.

Others were trying to get as deep underground as they could. A siege capital like Falcon Scott had plenty of durable subterranean shelters… however, if anyone thought that they could hide from the approaching doom there, they were sorely mistaken. No amount of

frozen soil and layers of mundane defenses were going to stop a Corrupted Titan.

There had been shelters in Erebus Field, too, but no one who had entered them survived. And Goliath was in no way a match for the Winter Beast.

As for Sunny himself… he had not given up yet. He still had some will to fight left in him.

He had spent these hours trying to come up with a way to if not defeat the abominable horror, then at least tie down and stall it. Sadly…

Sunny saw no way to win, no matter how hard he looked.

The enemy was just too strong, and his bag of tricks was all but empty. There was no time to prepare anything, and even if there were, he was not sure that he would have been able to pull another miracle out of thin air.

Killing Goliath was already an astonishing feat… in the past, before the Transcendence of the first Saints, it had taken all of clan Valor decades to slay a Fallen Titan. But Sunny destroyed the dreadful stone colossus in a single second.

…If he had been a couple seconds slower, the city would have probably already been destroyed. That was how terrifying titans were.

The further one walked on the road of Ascendence — or Corruption — the greater the distance between individual steps. There was a vast chasm between a Terror and a Titan, and an even more boundless abyss between a Fallen and a Corrupted one.

So, Sunny had not come up with a single good idea. His own strength was insufficient, and there was no one stronger around to borrow it from.

'Is it really hopeless?'

Despite it all, he was reluctant to accept that fact. And yet, a shadow

of doubt was weighing on his heart.

As Sunny was approaching the dormitory tower, his thoughts wandered to Gere and Carin. His mood turned dark as he remembered all the people he had brought to Falcon Scott, and how much effort had gone into preserving their lives.

Where were they now? The nameless Sleeper, the kid who had called him "Uncle" once, the brave soldier who had lost his arm to the Devouring Cloud…

Had they been evacuated? Or were they still out there, somewhere, within the doomed city? Most of the two hundred million people had already been evacuated, so... the chances of that weren't high...

Standing in front of the entrance to the dormitory, he looked at the piles of snow on both sides of it. The man who had been so happy to give him a sandwich… were he and his wife safe?

And countless others…

With a deep sigh, Sunny entered the tower and made his way to Professor Obel's apartment.

The old man met him with a calm smile.

"Master Sunless. Come in, come in…"

By now, there was no one inside the apartment except for the old man. The two of them remained silent for a while. Eventually, Professor Obel sighed.

"I wanted to thank you. Some time ago, I made a request of you… to not choose to save my life over someone else's. Back then, you didn't agree. I am glad that you changed your mind."

Sunny looked at the old man with a bleak expression. He remembered that conversation. Back then, he had foolishly proclaimed that he would not have to choose, because he would simply save everyone he decided to save.

Technically, Sunny had kept that promise. The convoy had made it to

Falcon Scott, and although there were some casualties, he never ended up having to put Professor Obel's life over that of other people.

Who could have known that their woes would only grow more calamitous after reaching the distant siege capital?

Sunny pursed his lips, and then said in an even tone:

"I am not going to lie, Professor… I am unhappy with your decision. After all the effort I've put into keeping you alive, you still chose to stay. It makes me feel as though all those struggles of mine were meaningless."

They had not been, of course. Tens of thousands of people — and maybe even millions — were alive because of what Sunny had done. But millions of people were faceless. To him, Professor Obel had long become somewhat of a personification of all the mundane humans the First Army was meant to save.

Him and Beth.

The old man smiled wistfully.

"I knew that you would feel that way. People who are as principled as you, young man, are a rare breed. They can't help but feel responsible for the entire world. However… the world is too vast, Major Sunless. You can't defeat it all by yourself. And you shouldn't be forced to, either."

Sunny looked at him with surprise.

'Now, that… is amusing.'

He couldn't help but snort.

"Principled? Me? Professor… you are deeply mistaken. I have no principles to speak of. I am just stubborn, spiteful, and a little bit mad. That's all there is to me."

The old man laughed.

"If you say so, young man… anyway, you must be really busy. I won't

keep you. However, I do have one last favor to ask… would you mind escorting me to the communication array? My work schedule is technically suspended, but a bunch of us old engineers decided to gather there. Who knows, maybe we'll even manage to restore function to the whole thing.

In any case, it will be an extremely interesting problem to solve! I already have a few ideas…"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then silently nodded.

Together, they left the dormitory tower and ventured through the streets of Falcon Scott, chatting idly as they did. Time seemed to slow down a little.

Nevertheless, they eventually reached the base of the communication array complex, where a dozen or so old men and women were standing, waiting for the latecomers to arrive. Some of them waved to Professor Obel, calling out to him with boisterous voices.

The old man waved in response, then turned to Sunny and smiled.

"We're here. Thank you very much, young man… for everything."

Sunny felt as though a lump was stuck in his throat. He lingered for a few moments, then forced out a few words:

"Don't mention it. And… thank you, too, Professor. Please, stay safe."

Professor Obel patted him on the shoulder.

"You must survive, Major. Don't hesitate to save yourself, when the time comes. Farewell."

With that, he smiled one last time, then turned away and headed to the other old engineers. They welcomed him with friendly greetings.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then turned away, too.

'Damnation…'

Gritting his teeth, he shivered in the cold and started walking.

The shadow weighing on his heart had become heavier.

Chapter-1057: The Fall of Falcon Scott (75)

He found his soldiers calmly preparing for the nearing — and most likely their last — battle. Sunny had chosen the members of his cohort based on their mental resilience, but even still, he was surprised and slightly disturbed by how nonchalant all three seemed.

Samara had lost her rifle, but was now in possession of Kim's carbine. She was sitting on an alloy crate, silently charging one bullet after another with essence. Belle was sharpening his sword with a vague smile on his face — Memories did not need to be sharpened, but the swordsman had a habit of doing so anyway.

Dorn had been wounded by the Scavenger. The deep cut on his chest had already been dealt with by an Awakened healer, but he was yet to fully recover. The giant man was moving his shoulder through a set of stretching exercises, wincing from time to time. His sledgehammer was nearby, its handle leaning against the wall.

When Sunny entered, the three Awakened glanced his way and saluted.

"What's the news, sir?"

He shook his head.

"No news yet. If we're lucky, the bastard will show up tomorrow. If we're not, it will be here today."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then added:

"In any case, we will have to deal with the blizzard first. Keep those charms I gave you summoned. Protection against cold is going to play a big role when the Winter Beast comes."

Sunny possessed the Memory of Ice, but he had also created lesser versions of the Ascended charm for each of his soldiers — those Memories were not as potent, but also required much less essence to sustain the enchantments.

They nodded, summoning the artificial charms.

Looking at his soldiers, Sunny couldn't help but feel a hint of fear. He had only known these people for a few months… but they had gone through a lifetime of struggles together. Even if he wasn't responsible for their lives, he would still have been fiercely reluctant to see them die.

Belle, Dorn, Samara… they were admirable warriors each. More importantly, they were his people.

Sunny sighed.

"...You just had to go and stay, huh?"

He had been fully prepared to have Naeve load the whole cohort on the ship, but the three Awakened silently refused. Staying in Falcon Scott was their choice.

Belle looked at him and grinned.

"Sure, sir. That's our job."

Samara simply nodded, choosing not to say anything in her usual manner. Dorn chuckled.

"We did. But aren't you here too, Major?"

Sunny winced. Of course, it wasn't the same… he was an Ascended, and one ridiculously hard to kill on top of that. His soldiers, however, were merely Awakened. They were not nearly as resilient.

"Yeah… I am."

Belle put his sword away, the smile slowly disappearing from his face. The swordsman remained silent for a few moments, looking at him with an uncharacteristically serious expression.

A heavy atmosphere settled in the barracks room.

Eventually, he said:

"There is something I wanted to ask you, though. Sir. You don't have to answer, of course…"

Sunny frowned.

"What is it?"

Belle hesitated for a bit, then asked thoughtfully:

"There are rumors going around… that you're dating Mongrel. But Mongrel, she is your Echo. What's that all about?"

Sunny stared at him, speechless.

"What the hell are you on about, fool?! I'm not dating anyone!"

The swordsman suddenly threw his head back and exploded with laughter.

"I see, I see…"

Dorn gave him a disapproving look and let out an exasperated sigh.

"That guy…"

Sunny shook his head, suddenly feeling an urge to laugh, too.

'He's crazier than me. Gods!'

"If you're done, Belle… let's discuss strategy."

***

Some time later, Sunny walked outside to get some fresh air. The air was much cleaner in Antarctica, after all… it would be a waste to remain inside all the time, even despite the cold.

As Sunny stared at the distant sky, he suddenly noticed a black bird looking at him from a nearby roof. Then, he heard the sound of

approaching footsteps.

"Sunny. There you are."

Master Jet appeared from behind a corner and walked over to him, then stopped, her icy blue eyes full of coldness that was even more chilling than the polar night.

He looked at her, then smiled.

"Here I am."

She sighed.

"I sent all the information we have about the Winter Beast to your communicator. Did you read it?"

He nodded. Sadly, there was little known about the titan and its abilities — even though Saint Tyris had spent months suppressing the creature, most of their drawn-out battle had not been a direct one. The Winter Beast had shown an eerie ability to control cold, snow, and wind. Since Sky Tide commanded the winds, as well, their battlefield had been the sky above the Antarctic Center itself.

It was precisely because the titan's most dreadful power had been continuously countered by Saint Tyris that no one knew its true extent. It had to be tremendous, though, considering that the mere presence of the creature was distorting communications across the entire region.

All Sunny and Jet could do was make educated guesses.

She hesitated.

"...Good, then."

After that, both fell silent.

Sunny looked at Soul Reaper, remembering the past. She was the first person he had met after surviving the First Nightmare… back then, Jet looked like an unreachable goddess to him. Seeing her cold beauty, he had been stunned… luckily, she promptly slapped some

sense back into him.

After that, Master Jet was always in the background of his life, arguably saving it on more than one occasion with her advice and slightly jaded wisdom.

And now, they were equals.

It was funny… the two of them had only met a few years ago, but Sunny felt as though he had known Jet all his life. Maybe because those years felt like several lifetimes…

He sighed, then suddenly asked:

"Master Jet… I've always wanted to ask. Why did you really join the government? Considering your abilities and character, the Legacy clans probably showered you with offers — and incredible ones, at that. Hell, you must have received a Special Strategic Asset designation, as well."

They had briefly talked about it in the past, but Sunny always felt that he did not know the full truth.

Soul Reaper looked at him with a surprised expression.

"What? Where did this come from?"

He chuckled.

"Just… curious, that's all."

Jet remained silent for a bit, then scoffed.

"Well, alright. But you are really overestimating me. A Special Strategic Asset? I wasn't even designated as a simple Strategic Asset. Sure, my Aspect was a dangerous and unique one, but other than that, I was completely unremarkable. I was foolish, timid, and unsure of myself, too.

It was only later… much later… after being beaten by life over and over again that I got rid of some of my foolishness and bloomed into this awesome and incomparably majestic figure you see in front of

yourself today. Satisfied?"

Sunny smiled.

"I guess."

After a few moments of silence, he asked:

"Do you regret it, though? The path that you took?"

She looked away, a thoughtful expression appearing on her face. Master Jet pondered his question for a bit, then shrugged.

Her voice was calm:

"Ours is a bitter life, Sunny. From the outskirts of NQSC to here, it has often been bitter, and only rarely sweet. A life like that… it would be a waste, to make it taste more bitter still with regret. So, no. I might be unsatisfied with many things, but I would never waste my time on regret."

Jet looked at him and raised a brow.

"Why? Are you feeling regretful about something?"

Sunny laughed.

"Honestly? Right now, I am regretting pretty much every single decision I've made in my life."

She stared at him blankly, then rolled her eyes.

"Well, get over it. We have a titan to fight."

And so they did.

The temperature continued to plunge, and the winds grew more and more frenzied, howling through the streets of the siege capital like hungry wolves.

Faster than everyone had hoped, only a few short hours later...

The Winter Beast had reached Falcon Scott.

Chapter-1058: The Fall of Falcon Scott (76)

The remains of the field army sent to the Antarctic Center gathered into a formation after marching across the giant crater. The hill-like stone corpse of the Fallen Titan Goliath, the pit created by the enormous explosion, and the city with millions of defenseless humans sheltering inside were now behind them.

In front of them were a vast field of snow and the towering peaks of the mountains.

There were around twenty thousand mundane soldiers, some of them piloting the mighty war platforms, and a thousand or so Awakened gathered in front of the crater. Just like Gere had said, very few members of the First Army had used the priority right to be evacuated ahead of civilians. Most had remained, and were now preparing to face a dreadful foe.

The Winter Beast.

The plan of the battle was rather simple… the creature's physical body was rumored to be hidden at the heart of the blizzard, protected by hurricane winds and murderous cold. To prevent it from reaching the siege capital, the army was going to advance into the snowstorm and confront the titan.

Neither mundane soldiers nor the Awakened had any hope of actually damaging a Corrupted Nightmare Creature. Luckily, an abomination that mostly relied on unnatural powers to kill its prey could not be too formidable in a physical confrontation. The few Masters who still remained with the army had a good chance of wounding, or even slaying it… if they could get close enough.

The role of the soldiers and the Awakened was to bury the titan

under their bodies and distract it, hopefully giving the Ascended an opportunity to strike.

No one knew if the plan had even a theoretical chance of working, but it was their best chance.

Aside from Sunny and Jet, there were two more Masters who had both survived the previous weeks of the siege and chosen to stay and fight. The four of them were spread across the formation, each commanding one of the four brigades.

Nightmare was still slumbering because of the wounds he had received during the previous battle, but Saint, maybe due to the [Mantle of Darkness], had already recovered. However, Sunny did not summon her yet — he wanted to keep his strongest weapon at hand in case things went wrong.

If the army was unsuccessful in their desperate gamble to breach the wall of the blizzard, he would send one of his shadows ahead, to allow the taciturn knight to emerge from it near the titan and engage the abomination in battle.

That was his last resort.

…Even still, Sunny did not know if Saint would be able to do anything. That was the main problem — none of them knew anything for sure. The Winter Beast was just too unknown and mysterious. Chances were, every single one of them would die long before catching a glimpse of the titan's true body.

'Curse that fiend.'

Sunny was standing in front of the brigade of grim-faced soldiers who were now under his nominal command. The members of his cohort were right behind him, and behind them were the rest of the Awakened. The mundane soldiers were at the back of the column, comprising most of it.

All of them were looking ahead, struggling against the cruel winds.

In front of them… a cloud of snow was descending from the mountains, slowly blotting out the sky. It was like a swirling white

wall was slowly erasing the world. With each second, the winds were growing stronger, and the terrible cold was becoming more unbearable.

The blizzard was coming.

Sunny sighed, then looked over his shoulder.

"Get ready!"

Without Kim, the members of his cohort lost the ability to borrow his sight. Each of them had summoned a luminous Memory, and so had the rest of the Awakened in the brigade. The mundane soldiers, too, were equipped with various light-producing devices. Beams of powerful spotlights shot into the darkness from the shoulders of the towering MWPs.

The brigade appeared like a river of light in the middle of a sea of darkness.

The harrowing snowstorm was getting closer and closer.

"Advance!"

Sunny took the first step forward, and the soldiers followed. The war platforms prepared their flamethrowers — since the titan's most fearsome weapon was cold, today, these armaments were more valuable for their ability to create heat, not for their destructive potential.

On both sides of the brigade, two more rivers of light flowed forward — one commanded by Soul Reaper Jet, one by an Ascended that Sunny had met a few times, but did not really know.

A few moments later, the snow was upon them.

Sunny shivered, feeling a merciless chill permeate his body. Even with his elemental resistance and the help of the Memory of Ice, he was shocked by how ferocious the cold was. He could only imagine how terrible it was for the rest of the soldiers.

It had never been the same the previous times Sunny encountered the

wandering blizzard. Now that Saint Tyris was not suppressing the Winter Beast, it had fully unleashed its power, causing the world itself to become its tool. This snowstorm was not an aftereffect of the titan's presence on the landmass, either. It was directly created by the frozen horror.

…In fact, the snowstorm itself was the horror. It was as much a part of the Winter Beast as the physical body hidden in the heart of the blizzard was. In that regard, the Corrupted Titan was much closer to the dark sea of the Forgotten Shore than it was to a simpler creature like Goliath.

For a moment, Sunny wondered if there was something hidden at the heart of the cursed sea, as well.

"Flamethrowers!"

The MWPs walking at the sides of the column extended their arms, sending long streams of fire crisscrossing above the formation. It was as though a flaming cage was created around the brigade — for a few moments, the cold receded slightly.

The billowing clouds of snow were instantly melted, and drops of water rained down on the shivering humans.

For as long as the war platforms had fuel to keep the flames burning, the army still had a chance to reach the depths of the unnatural snowstorm.

…However, they had not burned for long.

Chapter-1059: The Fall of Falcon Scott (77)

It was all a gamble. A dire, dangerous, deadly gamble… the soldiers of the First Army were betting their lives against the Winter Beast without even knowing if they would be able to reach it, let alone hurt it.

They might have made that gamble out of desperation, but they had also made it out of necessity. All of them had received a chance to leave, and all of them turned it down. Some had done it due to their sense of duty, or camaraderie, or misguided bravery. Some had simply grown numb to the horrors of the war.

As for Sunny himself, he was not really sure what had led him here. He had come to this broken land in search of power, but that desirous quest seemed so childish now. Antarctica had put a lot of things in perspective… however, this shift of perspective only made things less clear instead of revealing the truth.

All he knew was that he felt fiercely reluctant to leave the job unfinished, and that he did not want to fail the soldiers who had entrusted him with their lives. Sunny had never wanted to be in charge of anyone, but now that he was, their hopes and desires weighed on him like chains. Strangely, though, he did not want to refuse that burden.

He felt quite protective of it. Maybe that was what Master Jet had meant when she said that no one was free in this world.

Regardless of the reason, Sunny felt a frantic hope burning in his chest as he marched into the blizzard.

'Come on, come on… we can do it…'

Behind him, the column of shivering soldiers stubbornly moved forward inside a cage of flames. The infantrymen were all encased in suits of powered armor, which were all hermetic and insulated, capable of withstanding the most hazardous environments. The Awakened were all much tougher, and many of them possessed protective Memories on top of that.

And yet, they were all suffering from the terrifying cold. It was just too insidious, finding a way to pass through all forms of defense. Even Sunny felt miserable because of the snowstorm. Much worse, the cold was getting worse and worse the deeper into the blizzard they walked.

They had to find the true body of the Winter Beast soon.

'That cold… there's something wrong about it. It doesn't feel like a… a natural… natural force…'

Even his thoughts felt slow and frigid.

But there was no way back for them now. All that Sunny could do was march forward and endure, hoping that he and his soldiers would be able to reach the heart of the blizzard.

The fire produced by the MWPs helped alleviate the cold to a certain extent. But then, slowly, the heat of the furious flames started to feel less and less substantial. The flamethrowers were still spouting long streams of burning fuel, but it was as though the fire itself had been robbed of its warmth.

How could fire be cold? Sunny did not know, but he felt as though the flames now contained no heat whatsoever. They were like predators that had lost all their teeth.

'Curse it…'

He glanced back, seeing a few of the mundane soldiers staggering as they walked, then gritted his teeth and continued to move forward.

The snowstorm could not be too vast. They had to be getting closer to its center… all they had to do was endure a little longer.

Suppressing a hint of fear, Sunny sent his shadows to scout ahead. As soon as his body lost their support, the cold assaulted it with renewed strength. He cursed quietly and concentrated on resisting the furious blows of the hurricane winds.

Behind him, the Awakened and the mundane soldiers were shielding their faces and leaning forward to withstand the force of the storm. Even the towering war platforms were struggling to keep their balance — they had great mass, but also a much larger surface for the wind to attack. The pilots controlled their lumbering machines with intricate skill, keeping them upright and moving forward.

The shadows flew into the storm. Even though it was almost impossible to see through the raging snow, they had other ways to perceive the world. Sunny hoped that at least one of them would be able to discover the true body of the Winter Beast — after all, searching for it was not hard.

All he had to do was follow to where the cold was most dreadful.

The closer one got to the heart of the blizzard, the more terrible the unnatural cold would become… and indeed, his shadows were able to discover the right direction soon.

They all failed to reach the eye of the storm, though. Sunny felt a little shaken when he realized that, further into the blizzard… even the shadows started suffering from the merciless cold.

It made no sense, since shadows were incorporeal beings, but it was nevertheless true. Once they flew sufficiently deep into the snowstorm, the power of the Winter Beast seemed to transcend logic and reason. It was capable of freezing even those things that should have been incapable of being frozen.

'How… how can it…'

To his horror, Sunny realized that the frigid slowness of his thoughts was also not just in his imagination. If the Corrupted Titan was capable of affecting shadows with its powers, why wouldn't it be able to affect minds?

Nothing within the Winter Beast's snowy domain could avoid being pervaded by its power.

Recalling the shadows, Sunny shuddered and continued to walk in the direction they had discovered. Every step he took felt heavier than the last.

Behind him, a soldier fell to the ground. Others tried to help the soldier stand up, but it was of no use — the man was not moving. His comrades had no choice but to abandon their futile attempts. The column flowed past the motionless figure, and soon, it was swallowed by the haze of the blizzard, disappearing from view.

Not long after that, someone else dropped down.

Sunny felt dread settle in his heart.

'No, no… we need to keep going. I refuse… I refuse to give up! I refuse to believe that the abomination's power cannot be broken!'

He continued to walk with an ugly expression on his face, leaning low to resist the shattering wind.

Soon, more people fell into the snow. Sunny could feel their shadows turn lifeless in the distance. Every death cut him like a knife.

It was only the mundane soldiers at first. Then, one of the MWPs staggered and froze, depowering — a moment later, a powerful squall crashed into it, making the towering machine sway and collapse. Eventually, even the weakest of the Awakened started dying.

And then the strongest of them.

Engrossed by grim fearlessness and dogged determination, the brigade continued to struggle forward. The other brigades were advancing into the blizzard by its side, too. However… their rate of progress was becoming slower and slower.

The closer they got to the heart of the snowstorm, the more murderous the cold became, the stronger the winds grew, and the harder it was to make even a single step forward. It felt as though an irresistible force was pushing Sunny back and at the same time trying

to sap him of his very life, battering his body with blades of wind and ice.

'Damn it… damn it…'

At first, a soldier or two would fall every minute. Then, a new body would fall into the embrace of the snow almost every second.

Sunny felt a… a vast, maddening anguish. And a deep, biting reluctance.

And fear. Not for himself, but for the mission.

But then, he became scared for himself, too.

At some point, Sunny realized that because of the diabolical cold that permeated his mind, he could no longer feel his Dream Realm anchor. It still existed there, somewhere, but it was as though the mystical connection was distorted by a hazy wall of snow. Sunny could not sense the anchor, and could not reach for it.

He had nowhere to run, just like the rest of his soldiers.

'Are… are we going to lose, just like that?'

The thought filled him with indescribable anger and grief.

He could tell that they were getting closer to the heart of the blizzard. They were not too far away, now…

But the snowstorm had become just too calamitous.

Sunny had lost count of how many soldiers he had lost. In fact, his senses — even the shadow sense — were slowly failing him. He could not see too far, and he could not perceive too far. The world had narrowed down to a hazy sphere of a dozen meters, while everything else was obscured by snow.

In that sphere, there were only a few Awakened. As far as he knew, everyone else might have already succumbed to the ruthless cold.

'Gods… it can't be like this… it can't be, damn it!'

In his heart, Sunny would have been able to accept if they had reached the true body of the Winter Beast, but failed to defeat it. But the idea of being wiped out without even making it to the eye of the storm was enough to drive him insane.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it all!'

…But in the end, that was exactly what happened.

Eventually, still surrounded by the wall of howling snow, Sunny realized that he could hardly make even a single step forward. He had lost sight of the brigade and did not know if any of his soldiers were still alive. There were only three Awakened beside him… Belle, Dorn, and Samara.

And with each second, still, the cold was growing more harrowing.

He closed his eyes.

'...Admit it.'

Sunny hesitated, staring into the blizzard.

'Admit it. You lost.'

He shivered.

'You fool… what else did you expect would happen?'

It was almost as if the Sin of Solace was talking to him. But, no… those were only his own thoughts. He had not even summoned the jade sword yet.

His own thoughts were much more damning.

Sunny let out a soft sigh, then turned around and looked at his soldiers.

The members of his cohort were standing close to each other, bits of ice covering their hair. Their luminous Memories had grown dim and weak, and their lips were blue.

Their eyes, however… were much more calm than his own.

Sunny studied their faces for a few moments, trying to come up with a solid thought.

Eventually, he simply whispered:

"...I'm sorry."

Belle smiled with the corner of his mouth, then slightly shook his head. That action alone seemed to take something out of him, and the swordsman swayed slightly.

Samara reached out to support him, and he placed a hand on her shoulder, gripping it tightly. Dorn struggled a little and turned to face them. He gave his fellow Awakened a warm nod, then kept looking at them without saying anything. Maybe he couldn't.

Sunny remained motionless, watching.

He watched them slowly grow still.

And then, he watched as the spark of life was gradually extinguished inside them. Samara was first, and then Dorn. Belle was the last to go.

Only when their shadows had turned lifeless and empty did Sunny allow himself to dissipate into the darkness, escaping the murderous cold.

…In the embrace of the shadows, the power of the Winter Beast was not nearly as overwhelming. It could still reach here, somehow, but in a weakened state.

Sunny howled with sorrow and fury as he flew deeper into the blizzard. Even if everything was lost, he still wanted to try and reach the wretched abomination… he wanted to hurt, break, and kill it…

But he failed.

Even if the cold was not as terrifying in the shadows, it was still there. And the closer Sunny got to the heart of the blizzard, the more

annihilating the cold became. He still persisted forward, feeling his very soul freeze and start to grow still, dying, for a time. He almost made it.

Eventually, though, Sunny had to turn back.

He ran away.

He ran away and hid himself, waiting for the snowstorm to pass.

He survived.

Chapter-1060: The Fall of Falcon Scott (78)

The Winter Beast came.

And then, it left.

The last citadel of humanity in the Antarctic Center, Falcon Scott, had fallen to the Chain of Nightmares. The harrowing blizzard had swept through it, freezing the whole city solid and killing everyone inside.

Sunny had heard that a long time ago, during the Dark Times — or maybe even before that — the whole of Antarctica was covered by ice. It had been a land of perpetual winter, cold, and snow.

After the Corrupted Titan wiped out the last human settlement and retreated back into the mountains, as if satisfied to be the sole sovereign of the region, the landscape looked just like that, again.

The city was drowning in snow. The buildings emerged from it, encased in ice. Below the cliffs, a large swath of the ocean was frozen, as well. A gargantuan battleship was stuck in the ice, still anchored, the people aboard it all dead.

Everyone was dead.

Except for Sunny.

His soldiers were dead. Millions of civilians were dead. Professor Obel was dead, too. But he was alive, and not even wounded. Sunny had remained in the shadows for a long time, only emerging from them after his essence almost ran dry.

And now, he was digging a grave.

The earth itself was frozen solid, so his task was not an easy one. He had to summon the Sin of Solace, and use the beautiful jade blade to dig. Sunny was standing in a shallow pit, deepening it. His movements were fast and purposeful. Angry tears were streaming down his face, turning into ice before falling to the ground.

…He was not alone, either.

A vague shape that looked a lot like him was sitting on the edge of the pit, staring at him somberly. It had his voice, too.

"Look at you go."

Sunny gritted his teeth, ignoring the Sin of Solace. The cursed sword remained silent for a while, observing him.

Eventually, it asked:

"So, did you find it? Conviction? Or whatever it was you've been searching for?"

Sunny spared the vague shape a glance, then continued digging.

"No… no, I didn't find crap."

He wiped his face with an elbow.

"Actually, that's not true. I did find something. I found out that I was right all along!"

Sunny plunged the sword into the frozen soil and laughed.

"Faith, calling, conviction… all those lofty words. It's all rubbish! It's all… meaningless. People like Anvil of Valor and Ki Song have conviction, and that conviction helps them achieve greatness. Well, where are they? What good did it do?

Where the hell were they, huh?!"

He lowered the sword and stared at the vague shape with fury in his eyes.

"Those great people go around playing with their great conviction, while little people like us suffer and lose our little lives. But what's wrong with having small dreams? All I ever wanted was to live a good life, and keep people I care about safe. What's wrong about that? Why do I have to have a great goal and soaring ambition to be allowed to exist?!"

Sunny remained motionless for a moment, then returned to digging.

"I'll tell you why. It's because those bastards made it so… that's the world they have built. They can pursue their convictions and trample on millions in the process, because there's no one to hold them responsible. They can have their little wars while ignoring the death toll, no matter how much people die. Hate it. I hate it!"

Suddenly, he stopped, and then let out a small laugh.

"Effie... she was wrong. Well, I can't blame her… she doesn't know Nephis as well as I do. From the outside, it might really look like Neph draws power from conviction. And she does, too. But the truth is so much simpler.

I mean, she told me herself."

Back on the Forgotten Shore, years ago, Sunny had asked Nephis why she wanted to destroy the Spell. And her answer was very simple, indeed…

"Because I hate it."

Because she hated it…

She was going to destroy the Spell because she wanted to, and she wanted to destroy the Spell because she hated it.

That was all.

Sunny laughed again, then shook his head.

"Fool… I'm such a fool…"

The vague shape sitting on the edge of the grave grinned.

"Well, at least we agree on something."

Sunny continued to dig, thinking back on the past months. He… he had not found conviction. But in a sense, he also did.

'I don't need it. I know what I value, and I know what I want. It might not be much, but it's enough. I am who I am, and who I am is enough. It's plenty.'

He looked at the vague shape, and made it disappear with a thought.

Then, Sunny climbed out of the grave and looked at it.

There were three graves beside that one. They all stared at Sunny like monuments to his failure.

Slowly, he turned to the four corpses that lay on the ground a small distance away from the graves.

After the Winter Beast left, he had returned to collect the bodies of Belle, Dorn, and Samara.

And then, not too far away, he had found the body of Master Jet, as well.

Master Jet… Sunny couldn't quite comprehend the fact that she was dead. She had always been there for him. She had been the first person to meet him after the First Nightmare, and the one to guide him to the Academy. She had been there when he returned from the Forgotten Shore, and from the Kingdom of Hope, too.

She had even helped him purchase his home.

Soul Reaper had been his mentor, comrade, and friend. For him, she was synonymous with competence and power. And perseverance. If a girl from the outskirts could rise so high, then why couldn't he?

And now, she was dead.

Sunny couldn't believe it, but there was no denying it. Her lifeless body was right there in front of him, unmoving and still. Her beautiful blue eyes were now glassy and hollow. Her lips were never

going to curve into a smile again.

Soul Reaper Jet was gone.

Sunny's heart was empty.

'Right…'

He remained motionless for a while, then walked over to Belle and carried him to the first grave. Then, silently, he repeated the same process with Samara and Dorn.

Master Jet was the last, but he couldn't bring himself to approach her body for a long time. Eventually, though, it had to be done.

Feeling as though he was dead himself, Sunny approached Jet's corpse, then leaned down to grab it.

The corpse stared at him with glassy eyes, and said hoarsely:

"Kindly unhand me."

Sunny sighed.

"Don't worry, Master Jet. I am going to bury you well… there are no Nightmare Creatures around, yet, but they will come eventually. You wouldn't want to be eaten, would you? I surely don't."

The corpse remained silent for a few moments.

"...Have you lost your mind, Sunny? Put me the hell down."

He nodded.

"Yes, yes… I did lose my mind, a little. That's true."

The corpse of Soul Reaper Jet continued to stare at him.

'I should probably close her eyes…'

"Do you need me to slap you again? Snap out of it, damn it!"

A small frown appeared on Sunny's face. Then, he suddenly dropped

the corpse and flinched back, falling on his butt.

"Wha… what?! Master Jet, you're alive?!"

The corpse remained motionless on the ground. After a short pause, it said in a dull, hoarse, corpsely voice:

"No. I am dead."

Sunny stared at it, dumbfounded.

Suddenly, the corpse let out a grating, hissing sound. It was trying to laugh.

"...I've been dead this whole time. It's my Flaw… "you are dead". But as long as I keep killing things and absorbing their essence, I can at least maintain a semblance of life. If I don't, I'll be truly destroyed."

She struggled to turn her head and looked at him with dead, glassy eyes.

"That was the real reason I joined the government, all those years ago. I knew that I'd always have things to kill if I did. Now… Sunny… argh, damn it… can you help me sit up?"

He slowly rose to his feet, took a few shaky steps forward, and pulled her up to a sitting position.

Then, he blinked a couple of times and said:

"So… that was why you told me that it's impossible for you to die in Antarctica? Because you were never alive, to begin with?"

Soul Reaper struggled for a few moments, and then took a labored breath — the first one since he had found her in the snowfield outside the city.

"Yes. It was a figure of speech."

Both of them remained quiet for a while, not knowing what to say.

Then, Jet suddenly turned her head. Her eyes glistened a little.

"Sunny… look! Look there."

He turned around, not knowing what she wanted him to see. Nothing seemed to have changed… the graves, the snow, the frozen buildings of the destroyed city were all the same.

However, far away… a thin line of pale lilac appeared above the horizon, breaking the reign of cold darkness.

Soul Reaper tried to smile, but failed.

"The sun is rising. The night… it's over."

[End of volume five: Dread Night.]